

CHOOSE JOY

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Text: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

SCRIPTURE

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All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. ² Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³ He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

SERMON

At this time of year, the major focus of attention turns to the Super Bowl. Talk of the upcoming game fills our social media pages and news outlets. Yesterday morning, I heard about a young boy who won his school science fair project on proving that Tom Brady did in fact cheat in the 2015 Super Bowl game. The infamous Deflategate debate returns. I have listened to talk about the kinds of commercials we are going to see and how each one cost three million dollars, which by the way will be the only thing I will be watching since neither of the teams I was rooting for last Sunday made it to the big game. It is incredible the amount of attention we give it. And yet, a short time afterward, the outcome of the game, and even the names of the teams are forgotten by all but the most dedicated football fans. In today's story we also see that the attention of an entire nation is focused on a major event. It comes from one of the lesser known books of the Bible, the book of Nehemiah. It is a story that doesn't come up in the lectionary very often so this is actually the first time I have preached on this text. I had to look back on the history to understand what was going on. So let me share with you just a little background that leads up to our reading.

In 586 BC, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and sent thousands of Jews to Babylon in exile. It was one of the darkest times in the history of the Jewish people. Their culture, their religion, their entire way of life was shaken and almost destroyed. But 140 years later, a Jewish official named Nehemiah, was granted permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city. So he took a group of other exiles with him and they began a massive renovation project.

The first seven chapters' record how Nehemiah and his co-workers rebuilt the city with no heavy equipment and under constant threat of attack in just 52 days. When all the work was completed it was time to celebrate and worship. And that is where we pick up the story this morning. Chapter eight begins with all the people gathered in the square before the Water Gate. Ezra, in his role as scribe, brings out the five scrolls of the Law of Moses and begins to read aloud.

From morning until the afternoon, the people stood in the security of their newly built city and heard the past promises of God. The Super Bowl game doesn't even last that long. And as they listened to the stories of Adam and Eve, of Noah and Abraham and of Moses, they became overwhelmed by all that they heard. I imagine they felt gratitude and relief but also sadness for all that they had lost. And scripture tells us that as a result of hearing God's law, the people had tears in their eyes, grief in their hearts, and their knees to the ground.

But Governor Nehemiah and Pastor Ezra didn't let the people wallow in their tears. This was a celebration after all. "Go and have a good time, eat and drink," they said. "Do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

The late Billy Graham once said that, "joy is one of the marks of a true believer. This is not a gushy emotion or a forced grin, but the security of knowing God's love." G.K. Chesterton said, "joy...is the gigantic secret of the Christian." C.S. Lewis put it this way, "joy is the serious business of heaven." And Brother Lawrence said it like this: "joy is the surest sign of the presence of God."

Last week Pastor Howard talked about the wedding at Cana. He focused on how even in those times where Jesus does something miraculous, there were still people hard at work in the background. Jesus doesn't perform miracles alone...it takes the work of the whole community and in the end, there is joy...joy of a wedding...joy found in the Lord.

I've heard that a pessimist is someone "who can look at the land of milk and honey and see only calories and cholesterol." Nehemiah could have been sad and bitter and no one would have blamed him for complaining. His people had been forced from their land and their temple had been destroyed. The generations who remembered were long gone. But that is not the message or attitude he chose. He and Ezra point to a greater truth, the bigger picture behind God's law...that God has always been and will always be present. And it is this knowledge that brings a sense of hope and joy.

Each of us has experienced times of helplessness and hopelessness. Each of us has faced problems that appeared to be overwhelming. And one of the most challenging times to maintain our sense of joy is when we experience change. All of us will be going through a lot of change this next year and change can stir up our anxiety. What will help all of us is to stay focused on the joys and the opportunities God brings us in midst of the change.

It can be difficult to feel God's presence and to have a sense of joy when we face uncertainties. But Nehemiah tells us not to grieve because the joy of the Lord will be our strength.

When Sumner Spence expressed his desire to attend college, many people scoffed because he suffers from cerebral palsy. Sumner can't read books because his eyes won't focus. He can't hold onto things very well because his hands clench uncontrollably. Taking notes in a classroom would be out of the question. Anyone who knew Sumner would have thought it perfectly understandable if he had never set a goal beyond learning how to operate his wheelchair. But that wasn't good enough for Sumner. And it certainly wasn't good enough for his mother, Susan Spence.

Despite the seemingly insurmountable odds, Sumner Spence enrolled at the University of Delaware. His mother attended all his classes, faithfully taking his notes for him. Each evening she would enter the lecture notes into a special computer program whose digital voice read the notes back to Sumner as he studied.

Over the course of two and a half years, Susan Spence scanned more than 5,000 pages of textbook material and edited the scanned text for accuracy so Sumner could effectively study. One particular class assignment called for Sumner's mother to go the extra mile. The students were asked to read the novel *The Cloud Atlas*. The famous author was going to be a special guest lecturer on the campus. Sumner's mom was not aware an electronic version of the novel existed, so she re-typed the entire book into their home computer.

On the evening of May 24, 2007, Susan Spence took a seat in the back of the auditorium, and she watched as Sumner wheeled himself across the platform to receive his Associate of Arts degree. After addressing his fellow graduates at the commencement ceremony, more than 300 students and family members in attendance erupted in a standing ovation for this determined boy and his loyal mother. At that moment, the joy was more complete than either one of them had ever dreamed possible. Joy doesn't really come naturally to anyone. It is something we've got to practice. But once we get the hang of it, it becomes contagious.

So, our joy is knowing that no matter what comes our way - whether it's personal hardship for us or our family - or maybe just the routine ups and downs and good times and bad times--through it all, we have a relationship with a God whose strength is vast and limitless. Because of that, we have joy. So may the "joy of the Lord be your strength."