

# THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

by Rev. Emily Chapman

January 24, 2010

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



## ST. PAUL'S

### UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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### Lectionary Texts:

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; LUke 4:14-21

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

*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. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.*

*<sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>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."*

In the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez tells the story of a small town in South America called Macondo, which was surrounded by a swamp, isolating it from much of the rest of the world. One day a little girl wandered into Macondo. She was fleeing her own village, where there had been an outbreak of a plague that caused insomnia. A family in Macondo took her in and later noticed that one of their daughters couldn't sleep. The plague had followed the little girl to Macondo.

At first people believed the plague wouldn't be too bad, because if you can't sleep, you have lots of time to do other things. But they soon discovered another symptom of the plague: loss of memory. People began to forget things — where they put things, the names of friends. They fought this loss of memory by marking things with their respective names, so that all they had to do was read the sign to identify the items: table, chair, clock, door, wall, pan, cow, pig, and so on. Later it occurred to them that they might forget what those things were for. So they made the signs more elaborate. The sign they hung around the neck of a cow read, "This is a cow. She must be milked every morning so that she will produce milk, and the milk must be boiled in order to be mixed with coffee to make coffee and milk."

To ensure that they never forgot where they were, the people erected a sign where the road emerged from the swamp. The sign read, "This is the village of Macondo." And on the main street, where everyone would see it, they erected a larger sign that read, "God exists. "Thus they went on living", Marquez writes, "in a reality they captured momentarily in words that described what was most necessary for life. But that reality would be lost forever when the people forgot the meaning of the letters."

This tragic story is not unlike the story we find in Nehemiah today. The people are in a tough spot. And they have forgotten anything that might help them get out of it. They had come back from years of exile in Babylon only to find that nothing was how they left it, or how they imagined it would be upon their return. Jerusalem is in chaos and utter despair. Restoring order seems impossible. The biggest problem of all though, is that the people seem to have amnesia. They have forgotten who they are. Their forgetting began long before now. Even before the exile, when all was well for the Israelites, they had begun to forget. Things were going to so well, that they didn't think about God so often. It wasn't like in Egypt or in the wilderness or any other time where they relied on God for everything. Even before the exile from the Promised Land, Israel had begun to forget. Prosperity frequently breeds amnesia. Then of course there was the traumatic exile, and now the traumatic return to a destroyed city. The amnesia has set in fully. No one remembers who they are or how they even wound up here.

Sounds familiar to us at times. We know the reality of broken communities and relationships. We know what it is like to forget about God or to think God has forgotten about us. We know what it's like at times to feel confused or abandoned or afraid. We know that it is easy to self protect, to turn inward when we feel those things. We know at least a little bit of what these returned exiles are dealing with.

Ezra and Nehemiah are both leaders in this fractured community. Nehemiah is a governor and Ezra is a priest. Both sense that something needs to be done. Both seek to follow the will of God to figure out what to do. They start out the best way they can – with fasting and prayer. Like our story from Isaiah last week, they call out to God on behalf of the people. After a time Ezra comes to the point where our reading from today picks up. Ezra takes up the scroll in front of the people and begins to read. Our translation says the book of the law, but the Hebrew word is *torah*, which may be a word you've heard before. Torah now is the first five books of our Old Testament. It's not some list of laws but a record of all God has done for the people. It is the whole sum of their collective memory...the very thing they have forgotten, the words that tell them who they are.

And the people fall to the ground in worship, recognizing that it is only God who can lift them from their desperation. They remember their faith in God who gives life. And they worship. And they weep. What was it about this sudden memory that causes the masses of people (the chapter before says they numbered over 42,000) to fall on their faces weeping? Perhaps it's the guilt of hearing their sinfulness that is revealed when the Torah is read. They remember who they were and how far they have fallen.

Yet, I wonder if even more than that, they are tears of deep relief. Imagine it, after all these years of pretending to be someone you're not, carrying all the frustration and exhaustion that comes with putting on a facade, all of that is gone. The denial is over. You know who you and to whom you belong once again.

And so the weeping turns to joy. Because as surely as the scripture reveals the deep rift between sinful humanity and the goodness of God, it also reveals a God who never tires of coming to the people and offering hope and steadfast love. So

their leaders tell them not to weep but instead to rejoice, because what was lost is found, what was forgotten is remembered. And the people feast. All together. Those who had more sharing with those had less, they rejoiced that though they had forgotten who they were, God had not forgotten them.

The story shows us what happens when people gather around the word of God proclaimed and let it shape their lives and community. Each Sunday we gather together around our own Holy book, hopefully to encounter the living God, to remember who we are and what God has done. We need to come together and remind each other of the things we forget. Scripture on its own does nothing. When Ezra picks up the scroll and lifts it for the people to see, they respond not out of reverence for scroll itself but the God whose presence the scroll reveals

And the people respond together, letting the words shape their life and reform their collective memory. That's why we gather here week after week to open the book and read together, that we might be shaped by these words to be the people God has called us to be, and to finally say that the denial is over. You can stop pretending to be someone you aren't and be the child of God that you are. We come to the Bible to help us remember who we really are — loved and forgiven people called to love and forgive others and to be people of hope. Anything else is just pretending, forgetting. So we come here to remember, to see the signs around us that say "God exists." And not only that. God loves. God forgives. God gives hope. Therefore, as Nehemiah reminds the people, "do not be grieved. The joy of the Lord is your strength."