

Gathered Around the Story of God

1st of 3 Church as Community

by

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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. ²Accordingly, 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. ³He 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. ⁵And 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. ⁶Then 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. ⁸So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

⁹And 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. ¹⁰Then 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.”

Luke 4:14-21

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

We have begun a New Year praying, hoping and longing to emerge from the pandemic. For nearly two years whenever we have taken three steps forward, sometimes it seems we had to take two steps back – occasionally more. Recently the Omicron spike has set us back once again with continuing uncertainty. Two years is a long time to wonder if your children are learning what they need to know at home or if they are safe at school. Two years is a long time for business leaders to consider what the future of the workplace will look like, or should look like. Two years is a long time to worry about whether almost every social interaction beyond our little pod is safe or not. And two years is a very long time for a community of people – whose identity is forged in gathering together – to be apart from one another. I am talking, of course, about the church.

You have seen how the pandemic is taking its toll in the headlines: “Churches further stressed by the pandemic” was the title of last Monday’s article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.¹ *The Wall Street Journal’s* was “Churches Changed During the Pandemic and Many Aren’t Coming Back.”² *The Economist* broadened its scope beyond the church, headlining: “The World’s Religions Face a Post-pandemic Reckoning: Many need to sell their property, some branches will have to merge.”³

Counter to these headlines, however, I believe we have a chance to do more than acquiesce to survival mode. We are being called to meet this moment with vision and courage to be the church God is calling us to be.

Here at Bryn Mawr, the pandemic has been a challenge, to be sure but it has also revealed some real strengths of our community of faith. We have the resources and the wherewithal to be nimble, for example,

¹ January 17, 2022.

² November 12, 2021

³ January 8, 2022.

an important ability in our rapidly changing world. Early on, we were able to pivot quickly and create a virtual community for worship and work, for choir practice and classes, for ministries of outreach and compassion. A large number of folks have sought new connections through the church, to engage their faith and discipleship. We have more members engaged in small groups than ever before. These two years – while we have largely been distanced from one another, have brought to the fore both a spirit of creative engagement and a resourcefulness.

Now, as we imagine regathering more fully in the coming months, we have opportunity to reconsider what it means to be a community – to come together as individuals in order to share a common life, to affirm our relatedness as brothers and sisters in Christ, to bear witness to the work of God in the world, and to grow in a spirit of discipleship so that our faith is evidenced in our actions as we seek to follow Jesus Christ. We are being called anew, during this slow emergence from the pandemic to think deeply about what it means to be a genuine community of faith – the church.

The scripture readings – not only today – but also for the next few weeks focus on the people of God moving through a transitional time when they were called to remember and claim their communal identity. As we emerge from this time of relative isolation I hope these biblical moments will help us ponder and reclaim our calling to be the gathered people of God. To make sense of: what we have missed when we were not able to be together; how we might change as we begin to regather more fully; and where God is calling us as we anticipate a post-pandemic reality.

Both of today's readings record transitional moments when the people of God were, likewise, coming out of a long season of waiting and into a new day of restoration. In the time of Nehemiah and Ezra, the people of ancient Israel have just returned from decades in Babylon. After Persia conquered Babylon and let the exiles go free, those who returned to Jerusalem went home only to find the city lay in ruins.

Under Nehemiah's leadership, and with the cooperation of hundreds of volunteers, they had rebuilt the walls of the city. They were moving on to rebuilding neighborhoods, planting gardens and recovering some sense of normalcy. But after the rebuilding was well underway these children and grandchildren of the Babylonian Exile realized there was an emptiness no construction project could fill. They could not remember their story. The story that had called them together in the first place. Their story immersed in God's story. They could not remember who they were, or whose they were, or how to make sense of their long exile and now their return.

But Nehemiah, who had a political appointment as the cupbearer of the King, and the priest Ezra remembered. They erected a platform on which to stand, and they called a meeting in front of one of the gates in the city wall they'd just rebuilt. It was the Water Gate – the one that gave the broadest access to people coming into the city – women, for example, could enter that gate while others were reserved for only men; children too could enter this gate and strangers coming into the city in need. Nehemiah gathered the people, and then Ezra started reading. He read the Torah, the Law, the five books of Moses. He read for hours about the core story of the ancient Hebrew people and their covenant relationship with God. These returned refugees stood for hours and listened to the Creation account, the stories of Abraham and Sarah and their children's children. We are told: "All the people wept when they heard the words."

Coming back together, after long years apart, in the reading and hearing of scripture they remembered who they were and they wept for joy. They were given again that core affirmation, which Old Testament scholar, James Sanders, described saying: "God has a story too; and it is God's story which is our real purpose in being." They wept for the recovery of their communal identity: This is who we are. We are a people bound to God by covenant law and promises, by God's passion for a life lived rightly. It's not our hometown that defines us, not our political leanings that define us, not our national identity even. We are a

community defined by God who longs for justice and mercy, compassion and service, love of God and love of neighbor no matter how unlovable that neighbor may seem. That's a story worth remembering as we look forward to regathering more fully in the coming months.

The second reading from Luke is more familiar, and it too is a transitional text from that moment when Jesus began his public ministry. The people of Nazareth were also waiting to emerge from a long season of difficulty under Roman rule. For the last several hundred years they had hoped for the Messiah, the appearing of God's Anointed One. The prevailing opinion was that the Messiah would come from noble birth, likely from the big city of Jerusalem, and rise up as a powerful political figure. He would be a triumphant military leader who would drive out the Romans from occupying the land and return Israel to her former glory.

Then on this Sabbath morning, a young man of their own village came home, the son of the local carpenter. He was no one in particular, perhaps a candidate for rabbinic school. They asked him to be the lay reader that day. He read from the prophet Isaiah, about the dawning of God's new day when the poor would be lifted up, people would be healed and made whole, and all the oppressed set free. And then he announced that prophecy was fulfilled in their hearing, that Jesus himself was the One for whom they had been waiting.

Each of these stories proclaim that the thing that will ultimately return a scattered people and reunite them again in genuine community is the Word of God. The Word of God tells us who we are; to whom we belong, and what defines us as a community: serving the poor; healing the sick; setting the oppressed free.

Now, I'm not suggesting that come Easter or Rally Day next fall, or whenever we all come back together post-pandemic that we will gather in the new Atrium and read scripture for several hours while the

reunited congregation stands weeping for joy. Although admittedly I like the idea of it! But I will say that as we begin to return we are called – in this moment – to ponder the core values of our communal life; to reflect upon not only what we have missed but also what we most need to reaffirm about what it means to be the church, the people of God who are defined by the Word of God at the center of our life together.

Those of you who are fans of the writer Kathleen Norris may remember how she often writes of finding her identity forged in the community of the church. In her book, *Amazing Grace*, she offers this beautiful and honest definition of our communal life: “We are not individuals who have come together because we are like minded. That is not the church but a political party. We are like most healthy churches, I think, in that we can do pretty well when it comes to loving and serving God, each other, and the world; but God help us if we have to agree about things. The church is like the Incarnation itself – a shaky proposition. It is a human institution, full of ordinary people, sinners like me, who say and do cruel, stupid things. But it is also a divinely inspired institution, full of good purpose, which partakes in a unity far greater than the sum of its parts. That is why it is called the Body of Christ.”⁴

Friends, that is our hope for the community of God’s people that emerges from this long season apart from one another. Our congregation is greater than the sum of our parts because we are divinely inspired. In the time of Nehemiah and Jesus, even in our own time, that divine inspiration, that living reminder of who we really are is uniquely revealed when the congregation gathers in the company of one another around the Word of God.

AMEN.

⁴ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, p. 271-272.