

How Then Shall We Worship

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

I'd like to start with a bit of backstory to today's Scripture reading.

The nation of Israel had been living in captivity in Babylon for 70 years.

Nehemiah received word from those still living in and around the destroyed city of Jerusalem, telling him how hard things were.

Gathering up his courage, Nehemiah, who was serving as a cupbearer to the king of Babylon, asked permission to return to Jerusalem to help restore the city. The king, finding favor with Nehemiah, granted his request. In addition, the king wrote letters affording safe travel for Nehemiah and his entourage on their return to Jerusalem.

Upon arriving at Jerusalem, Nehemiah sized up the very large task of rebuilding the walls around the city, as there were surrounding nations that would have liked nothing more than to annex Jerusalem as their own. Nehemiah's account of the rebuilding shows the people standing virtually shoulder to shoulder working tirelessly to restore the city. The rebuilding did not happen without problems, as the people are repeatedly assailed by those surrounding nations. However, with God's help, the walls of Jerusalem were completed in 52 days. Once the walls were completed, men were appointed as gatekeepers, singers, and Levites to serve the people.

With the wall around the city complete, the people settled in their towns surrounding Jerusalem. Now it was time to have the people assembled to return to a practice long since lost. A high wooden platform was erected near the Water Gate. This was a broad expanse where many people could gather together. According to one commentary, it was large enough that even those considered ritually unclean would have been able to gather with everyone else. Ezra the priest was invited to present to the gathered crowd the Book of the Law of Moses.

We learn that of those that gathered there that day, there were men, women, and even children, anyone with an ability to understand what was read. To ensure that everyone could understand, there were other priests on hand to help explain the law or in some cases to translate into Aramaic, so everyone heard the words in a language familiar to them.

Because Ezra was located on a platform above the people, everyone could see him and hear him speak. They could see that he was reading directly from the Book of the Law of Moses. They were hearing the Word of God as it was originally recorded. Something they had not heard in a very long time.

Recognizing that this was a solemn occasion the people stood up throughout the reading of the Law. When Ezra offered praise to the Lord, the people all concurred by answering “Amen, Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord together. Their worship was

mixed with tears. Their weeping may have been in recognition of their sin against God. It might also have been provoked by joy at the return of the Word of God in their midst. In any event, the people were told that mourning was not the order of the day. This was a time to rejoice and celebrate, and to share choice food and sweet drinks with others who did not have anything prepared.

This reading from Nehemiah can serve as a guide for us in the proper way to worship. It begins by God's people gathering together. Just as in the Scripture reading, men, women, and children should gather together. The understanding that both clean and unclean people could gather together at the Water Gate, should serve as a model for us today.

Anyone wishing to hear the word of God preached shouldn't have to worry whether they have the "right" clothes to wear or if they are of the "proper" social status to attend. Ezra spoke to "all" the people and encouraged "all" the people to share as they were able. No one was to be left out of the solemn celebration.

With the requirement to be physically distant due to the pandemic and with today's modern technology, it's easy for people to view worship services from around the world in comfort in their own living room. Many people feel they can worship without ever setting foot inside a church. And while private spiritual practices are important, private prayer and Bible study are never frowned upon, God's people were meant to gather together for worship. You may have heard the old

saying, “there are no lone ranger Christians.” Anyone who thinks they can be a lone ranger Christian is just fooling themselves.

The second thing that this reading shows us is that the people know they have entered the presence of the living God. The people knelt before Ezra in reverence to God, aware of his presence in the reading of the Law. In their worship, the Israelites experienced the awesomeness of God, the overwhelming power of God, the mystery of God. Today our worship leaders help to introduce the presence of God in our worship, inviting all of us to open both our ears and our hearts to what God has to say to us in our time together.

Next, Ezra led this time of worship by centering on the Word of God. He read directly from the Torah. This is an important element in the story. Before the Word of God can be believed, remembered, and put into practice, it must first be heard. When I was doing my pastoral training, one of my greatest frustrations with my supervising pastor was that this person preached more often out of popular Christian literature than the Bible itself. How can the congregation come to understand God’s Word, if that Word is not shared directly with them? Not only shared with them but interpreted in a way that addresses the needs experienced by the congregation in the here and now.

The people gathered to hear Ezra read from the Law were willing to stand for hours listening to God’s Word. Are we equally as willing to

invest the time and energy necessary to not only hear God's Word, but to also put it into practice?

The last element of the worship experience should be transformed lives. In today's story the congregation was left weeping, so touched were they by the reading of the Law. Were they weeping because they had been confronted with their sin? We don't know. Were they weeping for joy at the return of Torah in their lives? Again, we don't know. What we do know is that those in attendance were deeply affected by the worship they had experienced. Because Ezra shared God's Word with the people, they were able to see their lives through God's eyes gaining a new perspective on life and how to live it.

When we enter worship, we encounter God's presence and love for us. When we are feeling alone or abandoned, we are reminded that God is with us always. If we come with a feeling of arrogance or self-satisfaction, that time of worship will pierce our puffed-up egos and help remind us of Who is truly in control.

W. Carter Lester closes his commentary on this passage of Scripture with these words:

When we gather together as God's people, when we are conscious of coming into the presence of the living and holy God, when we center our worship on God's Word, when we offer all of ourselves to God, we cannot help but be changed over time. We gather to

give glory to God and to have God make a difference in us so that we can be sent to make a difference in God's world. When all of that happens, we have reason to follow the example of the people on this special day in Nehemiah 8 who ate and drank together and made "great rejoicing" (v. 12).¹

I couldn't have said it better.

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¹ Lester, W. C. (2009). [Pastoral Perspective on Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10](#). In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C* (Vol. 1, p. 270). Westminster John Knox Press.