

Third Sunday in Advent – December 16, 2018

Nehemiah 8:9-18

9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. 10 Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.” 11 The Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve.” 12 Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them. 13 On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. 14 They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month 15 and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths”—as it is written. 16 So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. 17 The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great. 18 Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

Let’s start with a joy check this morning. Nine days out from Christmas, where’s your level of Christmas joy at? Are you feeling good about your Christmas celebration plans this year or are all the preparations dampening your joy level as you think about all the things that still need to get done? There are many different ways that we find joy in celebrating Christmas. We find joy in getting together with family, whether ones we see regularly or ones who live a distance away. And yet our joy can fade if those relationships only bring stress because we don’t get along well with them, our joy can fade if something comes up and the family get together cannot happen for us this year. We find joy in giving gifts to one another. And yet our joy can fade when someone doesn’t like our gift or when eventually the gift is set aside and forgotten about. We find joy in our food, the baking and Christmas dinners to prepare. And yet our joy can fade if the food doesn’t turn out just right or simply after the meal is over and the food is gone. When we look for our joy in any of these things, we may be able to find it for a time, but it will never be a true lasting joy. So this morning as we look at our text we want to learn **How to Celebrate with Joy**. We will learn from the Old Testament Israelites the source of a true joy that will last in our lives.

The book of Nehemiah takes place at the end of the Old Testament period. Jerusalem had been destroyed in 586 BC with different groups of exiles taken away to Babylon, including men like the prophet Daniel. But now God was allowing his people to return to Jerusalem and rebuild. The first group had come back under Zerubbabel in 536 BC. Eighty years later a second group returned with Ezra the priest in 458 BC and then a third group under Nehemiah in

445 BC. The first seven chapters of the book summarize Nehemiah's work to get the city walls rebuilt, offering them physical safety once again. The rest of the book focuses on a spiritual rebuilding of Jerusalem.

Chapter 8 begins with all the people assembling on the first day of the seventh month. This was the Feast of Trumpets, their civil New Year's Day. This was to be a special day of rest with no work. And so they gathered to hear the Book of the Law of Moses read, likely parts from Exodus and Deuteronomy where God established his covenant with the Israelites. They listened to these readings from daybreak until noon. Verse 9 describes their reaction: "Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, 'This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.' For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law." God's law had done its work. They heard what God expected of his people and realized they had not been keeping his laws. The people were weeping because they felt guilty and convicted over their sin.

But this was to be a day of celebration, not mourning. Verse 10: "Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.'" While they could weep over their sin, they could also rejoice in God's goodness to them. The name used for God here is the LORD, the great I AM, the God of free and faithful grace. While they may have strayed, God had not changed. He would forgive their sins and be their source of strength as they moved forward in their lives. Verse 12: "Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them."

As they continued their reading of the Law (v. 13) they found that they "were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month" (v. 14). This Feast of Booths or Feast of Tabernacles was prescribed in Leviticus 23 as a fall harvest festival and a remembrance of their ancestors living in booths while traveling in the wilderness after the Lord brought them out of Egypt. Verse 17: "The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great." They continued their bible study and Ezra read from the Law for the seven days (v. 18). They could find no better way to celebrate than to continue their spiritual rebuilding, finding great joy in learning what their Lord expected of them in their lives.

When it comes to our Christmas joy, there is certainly nothing wrong with celebrating with family, gifts and food. We see Nehemiah here directing the people to do the same thing, enjoying "choice food and sweet drink" and sending some to those who had nothing (v. 10). The problem comes when those means of celebrating become the cause of our joy. We can enjoy time with our family and giving gifts and eating good food, but the joy we receive in such celebrations is not guaranteed every time and will not last forever. It is better to find our joy in the reason for the celebrations than in the celebrations themselves.

The first step in finding true joy is in weeping and mourning. The first step is to look at God's Law. As we look at God's Law, as we take an honest look in the mirror, we see each and every one of our failures. We see it in our relationships with those around us. We see it in our thoughts of disrespect, hatred, lust, greed, jealousy or covetousness. We see it in our mean words intended to tear down rather than build up. We see it in our actions as we think only of ourselves instead of those around us. We see it in our relationship with our God. As we fail to put him first above all else. As we fail to follow his will and so bring disrespect to his name. As we fail to make his Word our priority and give him the worship he deserves. The list could go

on. God's Law should drive us to despair because we cannot do anything to please our God and should be going to hell forever for rejecting him each and every day with our sins.

It is only when we are convicted of our sins that we are ready for the next step, "for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (v. 10). We cannot do anything about sin, but the God of free and faithful grace did. He promised to send a Savior and he did send a Savior who always kept the Law perfectly in our place and died to pay for all of our sins in our place. Our joy at Christmas comes not from the means we use to celebrate it, but from the reason that we celebrate it—the birth of our Savior who did all this for us. He is our strength for everything that we do. This is a joy that lasts because we will continue to sin and need that daily cycle of repentance—admitting our sinfulness and receiving forgiveness. This is a joy that lasts because its ultimate fulfillment is in the eternity of heaven when every single reason for weeping and mourning in this life will be removed.

With this great joy in our lives, this is a joy that brings true celebration. And so while we may not be going out to build booths and live in them in the middle of winter to remember what our God has done, we will keep coming back to the Nativity, reading and hearing again the Christmas story in worship and family devotions, displaying it in our homes as we remember what our God has done for us. While we may not be getting together for a week of intensive, all-day bible readings, we will keep studying God's Word, whether with SOAP challenge journals or whatever plan we choose to keep being reminded of what our God has done for us and what he wants us to do for him each day in our lives. We can celebrate with a great joy, now and always because the joy of the LORD is our strength. Amen.