

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 (Third Sunday after the Epiphany—Series C)

“Hearing the Word”

Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield CT

January 23, 2022

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our text is the Old Testament lesson for the day from Nehemiah 8:

¹And all the people gathered as one man into the plaza which was before the Water Gate. And they said for Ezra the scribe to bring in the scroll of the Torah of Moses which Yahweh commanded Israel.

²And Ezra the priest brought in the Torah before the assembly, both men and women, and all who were able to understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. ³And he read it before the face of the plaza which was in front of the Water Gate from dawn until the middle of the day 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 scroll of the Torah. . . . ⁵And Ezra opened the scroll before the face

of all the people for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. ⁶And Ezra blessed Yahweh the great God and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” with a lifting of their hands and they bowed down to and worshiped Yahweh with their faces to the ground. . . . ⁸And they read aloud from the scroll of the Torah of God making it distinct and gave insight and they 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 Yahweh your God. Do not mourn and do not weep,” for all the people were weeping as they heard the word of the Torah.

¹⁰They said to them, “Go. Eat the richly prepared food and drink the sweet things and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord and do not be distressed for the joy of Yahweh is your mountain stronghold (refuge).”

The Babylonians had conquered Judah and swept the people away into exile in the land of Babylon, modern day Iraq. The Babylonian Empire was eventually overrun by the Persian Empire. After seventy years of exile, the Persian ruler Cyrus and later, Darius, allowed and encouraged God’s people to return to their homeland. Nehemiah led the third of three waves of exiles returning home. He also served as governor of the people two different times. King Artaxerxes of Persia sent Nehemiah to Jerusalem for the first time in 445 B.C., in response to Nehemiah’s request to help his distressed and downtrodden people. Under Nehemiah’s leadership, the wall of Jerusalem was rebuilt in only 53 days—almost a miracle, given the opposition from the enemies of God’s people. Nevertheless, it was completed

October 2, 445 B.C. And six days later, on October 8, all the people gathered in the plaza in front of the Water Gate for a convocation.

One might think that this was for the ribbon cutting ceremony for the new walls of Jerusalem. But it wasn't. The people gathered together because they wanted to hear Ezra the scribe and priest read from the scroll of the Instruction of Moses which Yahweh commanded Israel. They wanted to hear God's Word! Men and women and children who could understand were gathered together as one so that they could listen to the Word of God read to them.

This sort of begs the question, when was the last time you asked to hear the Word of God? When was the last time you really craved listening to or reading for yourself the Instruction of the Lord in the Scriptures? These are hard questions since it's not a one-to-one comparison to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. We are blessed to have such a great access to the Word of God that is unparalleled in history—in books, computer programs, on the Internet, on your cell phones and tablets, on audio CDs and MP3s. You have free access to come to church and hear God's Word read and proclaimed week after week without fear of repercussions and persecution.

But do we always have that yearning for the Word? Do you take it for granted, thinking that, "It'll be here when I really need it?" Do you pay little attention to it during the week or even when it is read and preached here on Sunday mornings? How much time do you spend with the text of God's Word each week? It is quality time? Or is it a rush and a hassle? When was the last time you attended a Bible class?

Oh that all of us would have the craving for God's Word to be read and heard and listened to and understood! Oh that we would have a greater desire for the hearing and the learning of Holy Scripture!

No, I am not suggesting that we gather together to hear the word for six hours straight, from dawn till noon, as they did at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. But I am suggesting that all of us take a closer look at our lives in light of the Instruction of the Lord so that we "do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it" (Luther: *Small Catechism*). "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12 ESV).

Yes, the Word of God has an effect, and impact, on you and me. In other words, it does something to us. What effect did the Word have on the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem? They mourned and cried! All the people were weeping as they heard the word of the Instruction. The hearing of the Word and the teaching of the Word showed the people their sins. They were convicted in their transgressing the commands of the Lord. As the people heard the Word of the Lord, they were moved to sadness over their sins.

You and I must hear that very Word of God's Law also. We must come to see our sins as they are brought to light by the Instruction of the Lord. We must each confess, "I have not kept the Commandments as I should. I have failed in my love for God and in my love toward my neighbor. I have done what is forbidden and failed to do the good that I was instructed to do. I have despised preaching and God's Word through my personal neglect." And so we are brought to sadness over our sins. We, too, should weep and mourn over our transgressions

that have separated us from God and condemned us to eternity without Him. A death sentence hangs over our sinful heads too.

But this is not the only message of God's holy Word. God does not leave us in the sorrow and sadness, in the grief and misery of our sins. There is another word, a better word, that God speaks to us, a word that is the power of God unto salvation from sin and rescue from death. It is the Word that Yahweh is our refuge from sin. "The joy of Yahweh is your mountain stronghold," is literally what the priests and Levites, along with Ezra and Nehemiah, proclaimed to the people weighed down with the sins under the condemnation of the Law. That's Good News—Gospel!

In order to become our place of refuge, God gave us His One-of-a-kind Son, who, "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2 ESV). Jesus Christ took our sins upon Himself and suffered our punishment, our death, as He bled and died on the tree of the cross. By His sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection, the Word of God proclaims to us the "year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:19 ESV). All your sins and mine are forgiven. Our failure to always hear and to read, learn, mark, and inwardly digest the Word of God is forgiven.

What's more, we have a place of refuge with our God and Savior. You and I have a place where we can go when the devil, the world, and our sinful nature attack us. Indeed, that place of refuge is with the God who comes to us through His Holy Word with the message of forgiveness, eternal life, strength, peace, and joy. Martin Luther wrote in the Large Catechism, "God's Word is the sanctuary above all sanctuaries. Yes, it is the only one we Christians know and have. . . . God's Word is the treasure that sanctifies everything (1

Timothy 4:5). . . . Whenever God's Word is taught, preached, heard, read, or meditated upon, then the person, day, and work, are sanctified."

The Lord has overcome our sins and our sorrow through His death and resurrection. Through the Word of the Gospel the Holy Spirit has delivered to us the forgiveness of sins. We have been sanctified. This means that you and I have been made holy, transformed by the power of the Gospel, and given a new life in Jesus. This is a life that wants to hear His Word and to feed upon it as spiritual bread and living water—food and drink for the body and soul that we just can't live without. The Lord our refuge does satisfy us who now truly hunger and thirst for His righteousness. He gives us His gifts of grace through faith in the hearing of the His Word—forgiveness, salvation, and a strengthened faith that craves more and more of what the Lord delivers to us in His Word—the joy of the Lord.

God's joy in saving us from sin and death is the source of our joy in being saved. His Word goes forth and accomplishes the purposes for which He sends it—showing us our sins and showing us our Savior, who through His Gospel Word delivers to us forgiveness and eternal life. So joyfully, daily, crave His Word, hear and read His Word, receiving the gifts He has for you. Amen.