

Rev. Jerry Deck
Nehemiah 8:1 – 12

December 21, 2014

Roots
Get Ready!

A few weeks ago I mentioned the fact that the story of Naaman was probably the least well-known story in all of *The Jesus Storybook Bible*. Well, I've changed my mind. My guess is that this particular story today is probably the least well known. By and large we in the church don't often focus a lot on the books of the Bible like Nehemiah and Ezra. And so this story might seem a bit strange.

So, what's going on here? Well, as the Storybook Bible says, the people of God had been in exile for quite some time and finally were able to return home. But, their homes, their buildings, their temple, had been destroyed and so they were going back to a Jerusalem that was in a very bad state. Not only that, but of course, they came back with a group that was much smaller than what it was before they were taken into exile. They were really just a mere remnant.

Upon their return they began to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem, to rebuild their homes and their buildings. Brick by brick, bit by bit. But even now as they had rebuilt things physically there was still something missing. And so they asked Ezra, who was their spiritual leader, to read to them the scripture. For them this meant reading Genesis through Deuteronomy. And so that's exactly what happened. Ezra started reading the scripture for them. And as he did so there were also other leaders around, the Nehemiah and the Levites, who were helping to explain what the scripture was saying. There's some debate on what exactly that meant, but it probably means that they were both interpreting it into a language they understood, but also explaining what this meant in their lives. And the people began to weep.

It appears that their weeping was both genuine and, well, quite difficult to stop. Nehemiah says that the leaders told them to stop weeping, then told them to stop grieving again and then the Levites told them once more to stop grieving. It's clear that the people were moved by what they were hearing, moved by the scripture. But instead of grieving, they were told to start celebrating. To eat of the fat, to drink sweet wine and to give food and drink to those who were in need. And this is exactly what they did. They ate, they drank, they gave and they rejoiced greatly because they understood the scripture.

So, how many of you were familiar with this story? And the question is, "What exactly do we do with it?" Well, as I was looking at this passage this week there were certainly those commentators and preachers who weren't afraid to make a snarky comment or two about how nice it would be if we served congregations like this one! They point out that the preacher (in this case, Ezra) didn't have to beg them to come to Bible study or to listen when he was preaching. No, the people in fact were the ones who brought the

scripture to Ezra and asked him to explain to them. And, of course, the people weren't complaining if the preacher went over 25 minutes because there they were, listening to scripture for 6 hours (at least) and instead of tapping on their watches or yawning or checking their cell phones, they were saying "Amen and Amen," listening with rapt attention.

Now I suppose it would be easy for preachers to bemoan their congregations about this, but to be honest, I think that we preachers have much to be blamed for when it comes to congregations and their sometimes less than enthusiastic approach to scripture. I mentioned in my 2nd or 3rd sermon here that before going to seminary I had gone through the seminary catalog with a buddy to figure out how few Bible classes I could take and still graduate. The Bible, by and large, had grown fairly dead to me. And much of the reason, to be honest, is because so many of the preachers and teachers that I had grown up with had treated the Bible like a set of rules and regulations, a way to make sure we were minding our p's and q's. But this type of understanding of the scripture (and the faith) quickly becomes a set of principles that, quite frankly, didn't hold much life, at least in my life. The truth is that I can easily log onto Amazon.com and get plenty of books with great principles for life, so what's the point of the Bible if that's all it is?

But when I was at seminary I had a couple of Bible professors who slowly began to help me to see that the Bible isn't just something from which we detach a few principles in order to then live better lives, rather it is there to help us begin to see this larger story of which we are a part. I have mentioned this before, but I think it is pivotal for us in our understanding of scripture, because only when we see the Bible as a story of which we are a part will it really begin to move us, to become a part of us, to become alive to us and in us. Hebrews says that the Word of God is a living thing and if we fail to see that or if we preachers fail to help our congregations understand that, then we shouldn't be surprised when the Bible is something which we get less than excited about. We shouldn't be surprised if it becomes burdensome. a bore, seemingly dead even.

But I believe that when we begin to see the scripture as a storybook in which we are called to participate then the Bible really becomes alive. Yes, like the people of God in Nehemiah there will certainly be times when it causes us to grieve as we realize that we've fallen short. But I think it will also, and even more often, cause us to celebrate, to party and to rejoice as we live into the remarkable story of scripture. So what does this look like? Or better yet, how have we at ZPC been living into the Bible as our story? How are being formed by this story and how shall we continue to do that in the future?

We'll think about where we've been this fall. We kicked off by talking about the Creation story. Remember, we learned in this story that God created this world out of love for us. That we were created by God and for God. And so, if you were here, you received a piece of clay as a reminder of the reality that you were created by God. You are not just here by accident, but have been created by God's hand. The clay was to be put in a place where you would see it each day as a reminder to this. A reminder that

when you feel like you're being here is just an accident or a mistake or as if you have no purpose, the clay is there to remind you of the greater story of which you are a part. This is how we make this story alive today.

Or at the tower of Babel. Remember this story of the people who, rather than being scattered, wanted to play it safe and build a tower where they could just stay close to home and with people with whom they were comfortable. But God told them to go and so he forced them away from what was safe and comfortable. And we become participants in that story when we go out from what is comfortable in order to spread the love and grace of God. The story of Babel comes alive today when we go on trips to Kentucky or Egypt or Spain or Romania or Mexico.

Or the story of Abraham. Remember God told him to "Go" and he did so with little problem, it seems. But then when he gets into enemy territory the excitement (in theory) of going begins to fade and so he starts relying on himself rather than God. And we see this story lived out in our own lives when so often we rally behind going for God in theory and yet are tempted to fall back to our old ways when we get frightened. And so we are entering into this story now as we move forward with Jeremiah House, with providing a home and love for those who are battling addictions. Sure there will be times when we might want to go back, but we live the Bible out as we keep moving forward.

Or the story of Joseph. We talked about how again and again and again Joseph could have decided to just allow the injustice that happened to him to keep him down. He could have refused to forgive and never moved forward, never participated in the amazing mission that God had for him. And so, as a part of living into that story we wrote down something or someone we were wrestling to forgive and then we came down these aisles in order to watch them dissolve in water. Again it's a sign to us that the story of Joseph is not dead, but continues to live in us and shape us into a different people.

And then there was the call of Moses. Remember how quickly he went from "Here I am" to "Who am I?" A story about how hard it is for most of us to live into the call that we have been given. We will continually wrestle with really believing we have been called by God, especially in difficult times. It's why we are coming up with structures like Home Groups that will help us in those times when we have gone from "Here I am" to "Who am I?" Groups that will comfort us, challenge us and support us, so that we can live into the amazing story of the exodus.

And when we talked about the 10 commandments we were very clear with pointing out that it begins with "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." Much like we're talking about this morning, it's the reality that these aren't just 10 principles to help us live better, but that they are a part of the larger story that says that following these commandments are a way of making sure we don't fall back into slavery, since God has already freed us. I've seen this lived out in conversations with folks who, with great honesty, talked about changing their lives

from focusing on strictly making money and instead beginning to invest in God and their families. We see this lived out when we decide to not succumb to the chains of living child-centric lives as our society continually pushes, but living God centered lives. Or when we follow the Sabbath as a reminder that who we are is based on who God has created us to be, not on what we do or earn.

Or in the story of Joshua and the walls of Jericho we saw that rather than just going in and taking over the city that God first made them worship by walking around the city again and again, so that they wouldn't forget that everything they had and were was a gift of God. We live this story out each day when we live our lives as if they are gifts not something we own. When we spend time here on Sundays worshipping God or when we give our money to those in need or spend our talents on others we are revealing how much we are living into this story today.

Or when we had the great intergenerational service and we talked about the story of David and Goliath. It was a reminder to us that God takes ordinary, everyday things like stones and does amazing things with them. We gave out stones to all of you who were here and asked you to write down what ordinary talent or gift you have that God might use. We see this story coming to life today through the prison ministry when children do simple things like color place mats or make cut outs of their hands and when adults do ordinary things like make cookies. Ordinary things and yet, we've seen how those acts of grace and love penetrate the hearts of those in prison who experience grace for the first time. And so in doing these things we are leaping into the story of David and Goliath.

And then a couple of weeks ago we talked about how the story of Jonah is one in which shows just how small our world can be. As he sat there bemoaning his dead plant he seemed to care little about the great city just down the street. And so that story is made alive to us when we decide to not merely focus on ourselves but to invest in places like Shepherd Community Center in the city just down the street. To be involved in the lives of those who are in need of food and peace and love. To not be merely content with our own welfare. This is how the story becomes alive in our world today.

These stories are a part of the larger story of God and they are, they must be, a part of our story. These are not dead stories from which we merely extract helpful principles, this is the story of the God who loves us, who forgives us, who desires to be with us and who yearns for us to be a part of his story and to help others understand how they are a part of this larger story. That's what we see going on in this story in Nehemiah...they are beginning to catch a vision for the larger story that they have been neglecting. Yes, there may be times of sorrow, but it is a time of great joy.

How exciting to be a part of this larger, living, story that we read in scripture. How exciting to see this story become our story. Boring? Well, only if going overseas and forming community and going into prisons and singing songs together and caring for those who are hurting is boring. No, I think these things are joyous and it is not surprising to me at all that it should lead toward parties and celebrations, food and

wine. Because we are a part of the mission of God in this world. A mission which we have seen throughout the Old Testament and one that we will see come in person on Christmas Day. Celebrate brothers and sisters. Keep making the scripture come alive by how we are living our lives. Help others to see how they can join in this story. For the glory of God-Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.