

Romans 15:4-6, 13 and Nehemiah 8:1-10

In the fall of 1994, I studied abroad in Beijing, China. At that time, five years had passed since the Tiananmen Square student-led revolt and massacre. A good many students were killed for their cries for democracy. For an American, it was eye opening to live in a communist country. At the time, I was questioning my faith, and a fellow student invited me to church. We finally arrived by bus at a huge hotel. We took the elevator down to the basement. I couldn't believe my eyes. There was a huge auditorium filled with people from all over the world. We worshiped in many different languages. There were interpreters helping people translate scripture. I found out later that people had traveled for days to worship at this underground church. In China, Christianity without government control cannot be practiced openly. For me, this was a spiritual renewal. I had been taking my freedom to worship and my faith for granted. Many of these people had been in exile and during this one day a week- gathered together- they were free to hear God's Word and to worship. God's presence was palpable. It didn't matter what flavor of Christianity or what your theology or what language you spoke...the Word of God was read and translated so that others could understand it and the people worshiped God and rejoiced.

I also think of where we've been with worship during COVID and I wonder if some of us find ourselves having taken community worship or Bible Study for granted? People keep asking what worship will look like after COVID. But then I really think of my Jewish sisters and brothers who can't take worship for granted because they're reminded how

dangerous their worship spaces can be for them, especially after last week's 11 hour hostage stand-off in TX in addition to other attacks on synagogues in the US. Yes, that can be true for some Christian churches in the US as well- i.e. Mother Emanuel in Charleston. I heard an interview with the quick-thinking rabbi, who had had training and found a certain time to throw a chair at the gunman so that he and several parishioners could escape. The interviewer ended by asking the rabbi when or if they would return to the synagogue. Without hesitation, the rabbi answered, "That's who we are as people of God. Unfortunately, as a people, we've experienced great difficulties and also great resilience. Especially in the midst of trauma, we gather to pray together." Another rabbi wrote in a NYTimes Op Ed piece, "We are shaken. We are not OK. But we will bounce back. We are resilient because we cannot afford to not be. That resiliency is part of the Jewish DNA" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/18/opinion/texas-colleyville-antisemitism.html>). Another rabbi noted that people will walk into that holy space in TX and still pray, still have faith, still love, anyway (Brunswick, GA) because that's who we called to be.

In Nehemiah, we find a people who have returned home after having been exile in Babylon for years. Talk about being resilient? These Jewish exiles were a fragmented community, a remnant of what used to be, and were probably not real clear on who and whose they were anymore. Led by Nehemiah, who felt called to return to help rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, they settled into their homes in Jerusalem and

gathered together for worship. Like all communities that undergo military invasion and the breakdown of their culture, their identity had come unraveled. For Jews the worship of God is their identity. To rebuild their faith and their customs pre-exile, requires recognizing that they have changed and thus, are reimagining a new life. Returning home, they were thirsty and hungry for worship. They gathered together in the square before the Water Gate. The place is significant because the square in front of the Water Gate was a place where everyone could be present, even those who were ritually unclean (FOW, Pastoral Perspective, p. 266). It was a place where men, women and anyone who could understand what they heard gathered together. Ezra didn't force the reading of the Torah on them. It was quite the opposite. They asked Ezra to bring the Instruction scroll of Moses, the Torah or Pentateuch- what we know as the first five books of the Bible. Ezra read the scroll of Moses into 5th century Judaism, as he stood on a wooden platform with six witnesses on his right side and seven on his left side. And the people stood while he blessed God as he read. And for five or so hours, he stood and "all of the people" STOOD...they STOOD for the reading of God's word. Five hours? Can you imagine? They had entered the presence of the living God.

Upon hearing the word proclaimed, "all of the people" responded by saying, "Amen! Amen!" while raising their hands and bowing down to the ground. Then 13 Levite teachers and preachers went around and interpreted or translated or answered questions, as they helped the people gathered to understand what they were hearing in the scripture. These Levites knew that understanding requires interpretation. They

knew that understanding requires translation. That's what good teachers and preachers do! Otherwise teaching and preaching would have no purpose. A spiritual renewal was taking place there as people were being transformed through worship, through the reading and hearing of God's word. People began to weep, as they listened attentively. It is unclear as to why they wept. Maybe they were weeping because they were "overcome with regret for the loss of the Torah during the exile? Perhaps they have been reminded of their own sinfulness and how they have fallen short of God's expectations of them? Maybe theirs were tears of joy, for the recovery of the Torah and for a sense of God's abiding presence and providential care?" (FOW, Pastoral Perspective, p. 270). Regardless, they were moved...they were transformed. God's Word can do all of that, you know? Scripture reminds us of who and whose we are.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he writes "whatever was written in the past was written for our instruction so that we could have hope through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures. May the God of endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude toward each other, similar to Christ Jesus' attitude. That way you can glorify God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ together with one voice" (Romans 15:4-6). As followers of Christ, we're called to glorify God and to enjoy God forever. And we don't do this by ourselves. "There is no substitute for God's people gathering together to worship. It has been said there are many things we can do on our own, but being a Christian is not one of them. Together, we are the body of Christ. In our life and

worship together, we should seek to share and to be inclusive, so that all parts of the body feel welcomed and valued” (FOW, Pastoral Perspective, p 268).

As a gathered body, we bless and praise God, reading God’s word together and experience the presence of the living God. In doing so, we’re reminded that worship is holy, and we’re a people of hope. I received a call this morning from John Jewell. He left a message saying he wishes so badly that he could be in worship with us today, but he is still healing from being hit by a car in mid-December. He said that he misses being able to worship God together in-person and to tell everyone he loves them. John made me think of Paul in his letter to the Romans as he reminds us that like the Gentiles, we’re to rejoice and sing praises to God’s name together. As the folks in Jerusalem were worshiping and understanding, Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites said, “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Don’t mourn or weep. Go, eat rich food and drink something sweet and send portions of this to any who have nothing ready! This day is holy to our Lord. Don’t be sad, because the joy from the Lord is your strength!” (Neh. 8:9-10). The religious leaders are reassuring the people that the joy from the Lord offers protection against the judgements that are mentioned in the Torah. They are free to worship with joy! Have you ever thought about holiness being connected to joy?! Maybe it makes you nervous or uncomfortable to think about expressions of joy in worship?! Some of us don’t throw our hands in the air, like the folks in Nehemiah’s day?! Maybe we think of joy as only happiness, whereas joy can encompass so

much more. Joy from the Lord is found deep within the well of our souls, spilling over from worship into our everyday lives. Life in God produces joy.

Steve Hayner, the former president of my alma mater, Columbia Theological Seminary, and past president of Intervarsity, co-wrote a book with his wife, Sharol, while he was dying of cancer. The title of the book is *Joy in the Journey: Finding Abundance in the Shadow of Death*. In the foreword, one of Steve's friends and colleagues reflects, "For Steve, joy is that wide place of God's grace- that sees the world in great need, rescues us when we are caught, even caught by death, and invites us in all times and places to live in the place of grace where we can breathe. In Jesus' name, Steve gave us room to breathe. He gave us joy in the midst of wrestling and questioning and seeking and hurting and hoping because he was living a resurrection life. This explains why joy was the primary word in Steve's life. He always signed his emails and letters, 'Joyfully, Steve'" (16). Steve refused to back down from the beautiful, broken world in which he lived. For he knew scripture and was surrounded by it and by his faith community; therefore, he knew that there is joy to be found even in grief, gifts, and memories so immense. In our worship, in our living and in our dying, we belong to God. This is our identity as followers of Christ. If we don't have God's Word in our lives, we hunger for it. Nehemiah tells us that the people wept when they heard God's instruction. We need to be engaged in God's word. Scripture tells us our salvation, our hope and our joy comes from the Lord. 6 year-old Loren Patterson from First Baptist Church in Dickson,

TN is sharing her joy with the world. It's one of my favorite videos to watch even though it's several years old. I can see why it went viral. Loren is doing her own thing in worship rejoicing through song and dance. Loren's joy is contagious! The Today show featured her and quoted, "This girl is bringing joy to people in a dark world. There ain't nothing gonna steal her joy!" These are the words she is singing. That's because Loren's joy is from the Lord. It is her strength. She is marching to Zion! "And a child shall lead them" ...isn't that what scripture tells us (Isa. 11:6)? Let's join her, shall we? Amen.