



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

www.mzluth.org

December 13, 2009
3rd Sunday of Advent
Nehemiah 8:9-18
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Nehemiah 8:9-18
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 130
Second Lesson: Philippians 4:4-7
Gospel: Luke 3:7-18

Rejoice in God's Word!

Understanding brings joy
Joy comes from the Lord our strength

It wasn't the birds who first said it. It was Solomon in the Book of Ecclesiastes who said "There's a time for everything, a time to weep, and a time to laugh." As we read God's Word this morning from the Book of Nehemiah, words you've probably never heard read in a church service before, we see that sometimes we need to be reminded by our God which time is which. Depending upon what we focus our attention upon, sometimes we will find ourselves weeping when the Lord has blessings for us that he wants us to rejoice in and celebrate.

In the middle of Advent, the season that was marked by an emphasis on repentance, our God comes to us and says, "Repent, yes, but don't forget to rejoice because you are so busy focused on yourself and your own shortcomings and you fail to see me and my forgiveness and my love and my promises kept." The place where you and I see these blessings from our God is not out in the woods, not on a lake, not watching a sunset. All these things will tell us there is a powerful God who made the world. Our conscience will tell us we should repent because God hates sin. I always get a kick out of people that tell me they can worship God in nature just as well as I can in my church. Tell me in nature where it shows you the reasons to rejoice. It only shows you the reasons to repent.

It's in God's Word that you find the reasons to rejoice. It's in his Gospel message that this powerful God, who made everything and put this voice in us that speaks up when we do things that are wrong, this powerful God still loved us enough in his mercy to send his only Son into the world to live and die in our place and take away our sins. That's why God says to us to do what the people of Nehemiah's day had to be taught to do – rejoice in God's Word.

They didn't see a reason to rejoice as they heard the Word that they had not heard, because they didn't understand. But when they understood what God was telling them, that understanding brought joy because that joy comes from the Lord our strength. Sadness, sorrow and weeping come from looking at ourselves, because we don't have the strength that our God demands.

You might be saying to yourself right now, “How could they not know the Words of God? Moses had caused them to be written down almost 1,000 years earlier. How could they not know them?” They didn’t have the blessing that you and I have. You and I have God’s Word in how many different translations and how many different sizes? You can put it in your pocket. You can carry it as a big study Bible. You can put it in your MP3 player. You can put it in your CD player. You can put it in your cassette player. You can even throw a VHS or DVD in and watch word for word some of the Gospels down in our library. They didn’t have that.

About 80-90 years earlier, they had spent 70 years away from Jerusalem because Jerusalem had been destroyed. They had been carried off to Babylon. They had lived along the banks of the Euphrates longing for God’s house but not having God’s house, longing for regular worship of God, which they didn’t have in the way that their forefathers had. The Book of the Law for many of them had become a lost treasure. They could keep alive the promises of God sending a Savior as they repeated them to each other, the promises of God’s deliverance that prophets like Isaiah had given to them, but they couldn’t sit down and search the Scriptures like you and I can.

When they started coming back, under Ezra, they started first of all rebuilding the city. The city had been destroyed. Now when we read in Nehemiah 8, it’s close to 100 years later, after the first exiles had returned. The city walls had still not been rebuilt until the chapters right before what we are reading. The Book of Nehemiah tells us in the first seven chapters how they rebuilt the city. From Chapter 8 until the end, it tells how they rebuilt the spiritual life of the Israelites, which were also in ruins and shambles.

They met the challenge of rebuilding some of those walls and getting doors back into the gates so they could be protected from their enemies. Now, Ezra and Nehemiah said they had to fix the spiritual shambles that were around them. So they took the Book of the Law and began to read to them. They read it from morning until the afternoon. As they read from these books of Moses, the people were troubled, greatly troubled, because they heard what God said to do and not do, and they had seen how they had done and not done in the wrong direction. They were troubled by their sins, and they heard the threats of God’s punishment. No doubt they could remember how God had punished their forefathers because they had not listened to the prophets.

The people were weeping. The people were mourning. They had gathered together to celebrate their kind of New Year, the Feast of Trumpets. There was no celebration. There was no joy because they saw how they had deserted God. They saw how deep and pervasive their sin was, and God’s Law had its effect. God’s Law crushed them. God’s Law convicted them of their sin.

But the day was to be a day of celebration. That’s what God’s Word had said. So Ezra and Nehemiah and the scribes, evidently they would read for awhile and then the scribes would take smaller groups and explain what it was saying and what it meant. The people were getting this deeper understanding. The people were greatly troubled.

Then they had to say to them that it was a day of celebration. This was a day where God had commanded them to rejoice because God had kept his promises. He brought them back from exile. He kept his promises to reunite his people and give to Abraham's descendants this land to be their very own. God keeps his promises. As they started this New Year, they should be celebrating and rejoicing because God had told them to. They had seen their shortcomings. They had seen where they failed God. But they needed to understand that God loves them in spite of that and he kept his promises because he is God and he keeps his promises, not because they were such good folk.

As the people understood that, they found joy. As they found deeper and greater understanding, they found more and more joy. Then they read in the Book of the Law that they were supposed to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles in the seventh month. They were supposed to build booths and live in these booths made of branches. That was to remind them of how their forefathers had wandered for 40 years in the wilderness because they didn't obey God. Yet God had given them that land that they were now living in. It was an emphasis on how God is gracious and God is good and God keeps his promises even though his people run away from him. The more they understood that, the greater their joy became. The more they focused on God and less on themselves, the more they focused on how God had overcome their shortcomings and forgiven their shortcomings, the more joy they found.

They found so much joy that they went and did it. They went and built little shacks out of branches and lived in them for seven days. Can you picture anyone today doing that? Can you picture us doing that to remind ourselves of how God has kept his promises? We might do it to go on a vacation to get away and live in a tent that way, right? But build it right in your back yard and then live in it when right inside the house is the nice television and the stove and all the other stuff that would have all those good things in it? You are going to live in some branch shack? If you think Noah got mocked when he built the Ark, what do you think your neighbors would be saying about you?

God hasn't commanded us, his New Testament people, to go and do that, but he has commanded us to find greater understanding and great joy as we focus on God's promises that come to us in his Word. The promises he wanted them to focus on are the foundation of the promises that we focus on – God kept his promises. God sent his Son to live and die in our place. We don't live in anticipation of it like they did. They were to do that to remind themselves that as God kept this promise, God would keep the promise that he gave to Moses to send the greater prophet, or the Lord our righteousness that he had spoken of through Jeremiah, or the child born of a virgin he had spoken of through Isaiah. They were to remember that God would keep all those other promises of sending a Savior.

We can look back and see the fulfillment. In a very real sense, we have it better than they did, right? We've seen what God has done. We've seen how he has acted. We've seen that he has kept his promise. When we understand that God keeps his promise, we'll find greater joy because that joy comes from the Lord our strength. It doesn't come from our strength or the things that we offer to God. That's naturally what

we think. I talk to people sometimes and they say, "I've tried my best to live good and do good by people and if that's not good enough for God, that's too bad. Then I guess I'll go to hell." That's trying to find joy in you as your strength, and you aren't going to find it. My strength, your strength is not good enough. You know your shortcomings. You know where you have failed your God. I know where I have failed my God. I know that these things are sins. You know they are sins. And you know the truth. The wages of sin is death. We should go to hell. If God is fair, you and should rot in hell for eternity.

But God is not fair. God punished his Son instead of punishing us. God kept his word. Sin had to be punished, but he didn't punish us, the sinners. He punished the sinless Son of God. And he tells us to rejoice in the Lord your strength, not your own strength, the Lord your strength. And if you want to rejoice in it, you have to know it. The way to know it is to be closer to it. Make faithful use of Word and Sacrament. Make faithful use of it, day after day. Reflect on the blessings God has given you. Get close to your God. Let him whisper in your ear as you read his Word. Let him tell you again and again about his love and his forgiveness. Don't make him have to slap you upside the head with difficulty and challenges that then and only then you run back to God and say help. Walk with him all along, and you will have a joy and a peace and an understanding that the things of this world cannot give. And if you did screw up and not walk with God all along, and if it took something to slap you upside the head, then know that God still loves you and has forgiven you. Don't keep beating yourself up over it. Rejoice in your forgiveness. That forgiveness is the joy and the strength that you will have because God is your strength.

As you prepare your hearts for the Lord's Supper today, reflect on your sins. Wail and mourn over them as you need to, but when you come to this altar and you receive his body and blood, trust that you are forgiven. When you walk back to your seat and sit down, that Sacrament changes you. It assures you are forgiven. It gives you a joy and a peace that is your strength that nothing else in this world can give. The Gospel is the only thing that gives it.

Maybe we don't have to act like we're still in pain. Maybe we can let that joy show as we walk back down the steps and back to our seats so that our children can see, as we commune, that this is something precious. This is something pretty cool, because it is.