



## Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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January 24, 2010  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany  
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10  
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10  
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 19  
Second Lesson: Acts 4:23-31  
Gospel: Luke 4:14-21

### **Listen Attentively to God's Word**

Understand what it says  
The joy of the Lord is your strength

It's kind of an interesting phenomenon, the experience from time to time as a preacher when you are standing in the pulpit. It's kind of interesting. You are in the middle of a sermon and then all of a sudden it dawns on you, "The people are listening today." You know that feeling when you can tell people are actually listening and hanging on to words you're saying and they don't just have that glazed-over look in their eyes or constantly checking their watch or thinking about what's for lunch. There are times when you are speaking or addressing a group of people when you know you have their attention, and there are other times when you know their attention is wandering no matter how good or poor you might think the sermon itself is. There are times when people are listening attentively and times when they aren't.

You've probably experienced that in your own life, haven't you? Have you ever been talking to someone, carrying on a conversation, and you know they are listening to you? You can see it in their eyes and in their body language. They are concerned about what you are talking about. You can feel their empathy or sympathy or love or concern.

There are other times when you are talking to someone and you know the only thing they are thinking about is what they are going to say next. They haven't heard a word you said and all they're doing is waiting for you to take a breath so they can jump in and talk. Have you ever had that experience? Someone you know is just not listening to you. They are nodding and grunting at appropriate times, but that's just out of practice, not because they are actually listening.

Is it any different with our approach to the Word of God? Do we at times just give God's Word lip service? "Yeah, that's a good thing; that's a neat thing that Bible. That's good. That's where I keep my pressed flowers." Or do we listen attentively to the Word of God and dig into it and try to mine it for new treasures and have it touch our hearts and lives in ways that go beyond anything we could ask or imagine?

Our Lord is telling us today that God reveals himself through the power of his Word, so he wants us to listen attentively to that Word. One of the challenges to listening to that Word is that God's Word is kind of like a pool. There is a shallow end where all the kiddies can play. All the little kiddies can tell you about who Jesus is and what he has

done for them, right? They understand that. But there is also a deep end that is so deep an elephant would drown in it. There are parts of God's Word that are hard to understand. So sometimes Satan gets in our head and convinces us that because we've encountered something in God's Word that we don't understand, it must not be worth reading because we can't understand it. Or he convinces us that it's all too hard to understand and we just can't get anything out of it.

This morning our Lord tells us to listen attentively to God's Word; to listen so that we gain understanding so we can understand what it says. God gives us opportunities and resources to do that. He tells us that the more we understand it, as we listen attentively to it and dig into it and chew on it and think about it, the more the joy of the Lord will be our strength. The more blessings we'll get from it and the more we will be blessed in ways that we couldn't imagine when we understand.

That's exactly what happened in what we read here from Nehemiah. Remember Nehemiah? He was Governor over the Exiles after they had returned. This is the third return from Babylon. The stuff we are reading about here is about 445 B.C. They had already come back for quite awhile. They had come back and started rebuilding the temple and rebuilding the city walls. They didn't get it done. He heard the report that it wasn't getting done and things were laying in ruins as the people were back there from having left Babylon. Some of them had come and were now back in the Promised Land that God had promised to their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Nehemiah heard what was going on, and it just hurt. It hurt him, and he threw himself on the ground before God and prayed a fascinating prayer confessing his people's sins for the people. He was saying to the Lord, "Don't hold this sin against our people, but help us and bless us so that we can do the work you called us to do." He does this while he is over in Babylon yet. He was the cup bearer to the king. As cup bearer to the king, you always had to have a smiley face on when you went before the king because it wasn't good to make the king sad. But this day, he came before him and he was sad. The king said, "Nehemiah, I've never seen you sad. What's going on?" He explained to him everything that was going on with the people. So the king sent Nehemiah back to be the Governor and to help rebuild the walls.

Rebuilding the walls was a challenge. The morale was low. They had kind of given up on it. There were enemies of God's people that did not want to see the walls rebuilt because then they were afraid that the people of God, the Israelites, would become a threat to them again. But Nehemiah organized the people and in 52 days they built the city walls and had the walls reestablished. It was hard work because they could only work one handed. In one hand they had to keep a sword or a spear because of the enemies that were attacking, and in the other hand they had their tools to do their work. They literally were doing it with one hand behind their back I suppose you would say. Yet God poured out his blessings on them and they rebuilt the wall.

After they rebuilt the wall, they come to the first day of the seventh month, the start of the civil New Year. It's the day of the Feast of Trumpets and they gather together and they say to Ezra, "Read us the Book of the Law." So they bring out the Book of the

Law, the Books of Moses. And from daybreak until noon the people all stand and listen to the Book of the Law.

Have you ever tried to read Leviticus? It's kind of dry. They stood there and listened to it all day long. They had no chance to pause and cheer a touchdown as they spent their whole morning out there. They listened to it, and it had an effect on them, didn't it? Of course for it to have an effect on them, they had to understand it.

Moses wrote the Books of the Law about 1500 B.C. and now they were in about 445 B.C., so 1,100 years or so. The King James Version of the Bible was written in 1611, 400 years ago? Has the English language changed a little bit in 400 years? Have you picked up your King James Bible lately and tried to read it? Did you have to stop and say, "What exactly does this word mean? How is it being used?" Okay, double that; 600 years to 1,100 years or so. The Hebrew language had changed. So as he read it, it sounds like they also had some of the Levites in various places explaining what those words meant because maybe certain words weren't used anymore or maybe they were used in different ways. Maybe idioms had changed and metaphors weren't the same. They had to explain it so they could understand it.

But look what happened when they did explain it. As they sat out there from daybreak until noon, and as they explained it, look at the effect it had on them. As they heard the Law and what God had required of them and what God had said to them and what God had told them to do and they looked at their own lives, they saw they were filthy rotten wretches. They were mourning and crying and wailing because they could see how they had failed their God and how they had not done the things he demanded of them. They heard how their forefathers had done the same thing. This understanding led them to the Feast of Trumpets, but they didn't feel much like blowing trumpets anymore.

This understanding led them to see some very important truths. God remains God and we remain sinners. We don't like that truth. We don't want to rejoice in that truth. We want to make ourselves almost at the level of God so that if he says something I can't understand or if he says something that means I shouldn't do the things that I want to do, I want to find a way around that. I want to find a loophole. I might approach it at times like it was the Tax Code. But if I could find just the right loophole to avoiding God's Law, then I would feel a little better about myself.

True understanding sees that we are not God. We are not going to ever be able to approach God. We are sinful. And if there are hard things in his Word that we can't understand, the problem is not God. It's us. We are filthy rotten sinners. How can I, who I am, with all my weaknesses and failures, pretend that I could even begin to understand a Holy God let alone tell him how he should be running his universe? In recognizing who God is and who we are, the humility that is demanded of us, we just fall so far short. We need that understanding.

We also need to see that the more we understand God's Word, the greater blessings are going to come to us. You see that here. As the people found the understanding,

yes, they were cut to the quick by the Law; but they had to be reminded by Ezra and Nehemiah and the Levites that were explaining to them, “Remember this; God is a God of grace. So on this day, God wants you to celebrate. Don’t mourn and wail and cry. Instead, celebrate because God remains God and faithful and gracious and good no matter how we have been or how we are. Go and make some choice foods and some sweet foods. Get out the good stuff and then share it with those that don’t have the good stuff. But by all means, celebrate because God remains good and gracious and loving and forgiving. He has brought us to this day where we can celebrate the rebuilding of the wall and deliverance from our enemies. So by God’s name, let’s make sure we go and celebrate.” The joy of the Lord is your strength, not the weakness of your heart. That’s not your strength. The joy of the Lord, his grace, his goodness and his forgiveness, that’s your strength. That also was the lesson they had to learn that day.

You and I might say, “There’s a lot in God’s Word that I can’t understand.” Well then, get out of the deep end and get back to the shallow end. Get back to what you can understand because there is plenty in there you can understand. If you pay any attention to what God says in Ephesians 4 about why he gives pastors, one of the reasons is to prepare God’s people for works of service, to use the Word to teach the Word. So if there are things you can’t understand, that’s one of the reasons God has put me here, not just because I fill out a gown, but so that I can teach God’s Word.

In our congregation we’ve made a conscious effort to teach God’s Word. We made a conscious effort to make things available for those who can’t make it to one of our 6-8 Bible classes we offer each week at various times and at various locations. We have a library downstairs that has the People’s Bible. If you say, “I can’t understand what I’m reading in Leviticus,” go pick up the Leviticus copy of the People’s Bible and read it. If you say, “I don’t have time for God’s Word,” have you ever looked at the Meditations in the rack? Did you see how big they are? They aren’t as big as the Supplement that’s in there. They are tiny little things, right? Two columns, 400 words; if you don’t have time for God’s Word, take a Meditations home, throw it on the toilet tank behind you and grab it when you go in there and read God’s Word.

Find a way to get God’s Word into your life. Don’t tell me, “I don’t have time. I can’t understand it.” Those are excuses. They aren’t reality. If you can’t understand it, there are resources. There’s the church library. There’s Bible study. There are other Christians. There are pastors. There are teachers. As iron sharpens iron, so one Christian sharpens another – that’s God’s plan, he’s laid it out to you. He’s told you that. If you say you don’t have time, start little before you try to get big. Don’t say, “This week I’m going to read the entire Bible in Greek and Hebrew, so I better start teaching myself Greek and Hebrew this afternoon.” Instead, start out with saying, “I’m going to spend some time in God’s Word every day so I get some understanding.” Use the Meditations. Use other devotion books you’ll find in our church library, but get that understanding.

When you get that understanding, when you read it and think, “That’s what that meant. I didn’t know that. Now I’m getting it.” God pours out his Spirit on us and he gives us understanding and with understanding comes the joy of the Lord is our strength – the understanding that no matter what we go through as we live in a sinful world; we face difficulties and challenges. We might not have to carry our tools in one hand or a sword or a spear in the other because we are being attacked like those guys were, but we face our challenges. We face a society around us that tells us there is no God or God isn’t being a very good God if he lets earthquakes happen and things like that, and how terrible God must be if he lets these things happen. God has said, “The wages of sin is death,” so if you want God to be fair and not send earthquakes, he shouldn’t send earthquakes because we should all be in hell already. But God is gracious along with being fair. Instead of punishing us, he punished his Son who lived in our place and died in our place. He wiped away all of our sins. The more that we understand that this is our strength; the more we will live under the Gospel instead of under the Law.

Think of the things you do every day during the week. How many of them are done just because you have to meet someone else’s expectations or demands on you? I talked about that with my Confirmation Class this last week. They came to the conclusion that just about everything they are doing, whether it’s handing in their homework on time or doing what they’re parents tell them to do, is just because they are afraid of being punished or of the consequences that come if they don’t do them. They are living under Law.

So I asked them, “Did you ever once in your life just do something for someone because you wanted to, for your parents or a friend, something nice that you weren’t asked to do and didn’t have to do because you loved them and you wanted to do something for them?” Eventually they all shrugged and said, “Yes, I guess so.” I said, “How did that feel? Does that feel the same as when ‘I have to hand in this homework or else I’m going to get a late work and I can’t play sports’? Does that feel the same as ‘I have to do what mom and dad said or else I am going to be punished or grounded or disciplined in some way, shape or form’? Does doing it because you ‘have to’ feel the same as doing it because you ‘want to’?” Of course it doesn’t. So as a Christian, don’t approach your life as a shallow Christian that says, “I have to do this or else God will be mad at me.” God already loves you completely and absolutely. He proved it by sending Christ to live and die in your place. There isn’t anything you can do to make God love you more.

Christ’s love compels us. It moves us to action. The joy of the Lord is our strength is what moves us to want to do it. Christianity isn’t about a bunch of rules that keep us out of the fun in life. Christianity is about how we can serve God. God’s a little smarter than I am, so if he says, “Don’t do this and don’t do that because it’s going to be bad for you,” no matter what my sinful nature says, “Oh, this will bring me joy and fun and excitement,” in reality, it’s probably going to bring pain and suffering and heartache.

The more I live because I want to love God and respond to his love for me, the more I’ll be blessed, the more I’ll go about every day with “the joy of the Lord is my strength.” If

you want that kind of feeling all the time, the feeling of that joy of doing something for someone because you want to, not because you have to, the place to start is by being in the Word and in the Sacraments. God's Spirit will bless you in ways you couldn't imagine.