

January 23, 2022 – Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

The people of Israel gathered at the gate as one man. A group of people so dense, so tightly packed together, that you couldn't separate one person from another. Men, women, children, everyone who could understand a word of Hebrew was gathered in that great mass of humanity.

They gathered together at the Water Gate. And no, I don't mean the infamous hotel in Washington D.C. I mean one of the ten gateways into Jerusalem. Called the Water Gate because it led to a natural spring which was the primary water source for the city.

The Water Gate was important for that reason. But it was also important for another reason. Two months prior, the gate didn't exist. It was a pile of rubble. Along with the rest of the walls of Jerusalem.

You, this account from our Old Testament lesson takes place just after the Babylonian exile. In 605 B.C., the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar surrounded the city of Jerusalem. They besieged the city, sealed off its Water Gate, and waited until the people inside began to starve.

When they finally attacked, there was almost no resistance. Half the city was already dead or dying. Nebuchadnezzar marched through the streets virtually unopposed. He rounded up the survivors as prisoners and sent them to Babylon.

And then he proceeded to destroy Jerusalem. He burned every building in the city to the ground. He tore the Temple down brick by brick, and then dug up the foundation, so that there was no sign that it had ever existed. He demolished every inch of the city walls. When he was done, all of Jerusalem lay as a pile of rubble.

No walls. No gates. No palace. No temple. It was all gone. The exiles living in Babylon lived without hope for close to 70 years. Because even if they should be released, what would they go back to? Their homes were gone. Their city wiped off the map. Their temple, the place most precious to them, obliterated, like it hadn't even existed.

But God was faithful. He had promised through his prophets that His people would return to their land. And so they did. Decades later, King Cyrus of Persia would conquer Babylon and free the Israelites in captivity. He even gave them his aid in rebuilding their city.

It took them years to rebuild the Temple. And it was a poor imitation of the original. There were those who were old enough to remember the original, Solomon's Temple in all its grandeur. And they wept at the sight of this sad copy. But it was a temple. The sacrifices could begin again. The religious festivals could return. They could be God's people.

But Jerusalem as a city was still pretty pathetic. People had begun to rebuild their homes and businesses. But it was still little more than a small settlement, exposed and vulnerable. This was not God's city on a hill, into which God's people took refuge from their enemies.

No, for that, they would need walls. And gates. And fortifications. And all the defenses that Nebuchadnezzar had torn down. If they wanted physical security they needed to do more.

And so an Israelite named Nehemiah asked to become governor of the region. He was a close advisor to the king, and the king was happy to give him the post. Nehemiah showed up, assessed the situation, and put the people to work.

They worked round the clock. If you weren't building, then you were guarding the builders. If you weren't guarding the builders, then you were sleeping. If you weren't sleeping, then you were building.

In fifty-two days, they rebuilt the walls and gates and fortifications around Jerusalem. They made Jerusalem a city again. In which God's people could dwell securely. It was a remarkable accomplishment, completed in record time.

And so, on the first day of the seventh month, October 8, 445 B.C., in our calendar, Nehemiah gathered the people at the Water Gate to dedicate these new walls around the city. This new start for Jerusalem.

What would you expect that kind of dedication to look like? When you dedicate a business, you generally have a ribbon cutting ceremony, with comically large scissors. When you dedicate a naval ship, you usually smash a bottle of wine against the hull. When you dedicate a new building or expensive piece of a equipment, you often have a plaque in memory of someone.

But when you're Nehemiah dedicating the new walls of Jerusalem, you have Ezra the scribe and priest read God's Word to the people. The entire Torah. The first five books of the Bible. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. From sun-up to mid-day. Rough six hours of reading.

How do the people respond? How would you respond? You'd probably be quite bored. You'd probably fall asleep. Maybe take out your phone. Check Facebook. Play candy crush. Perhaps you'd leave altogether and come back at lunch time, when he was nearly finished.

The people gathered do none of that. They listen. And they weep. They weep because they haven't come close to fulfilling the Law of God. They weep because the sin of their ancestors has caused so much pain and suffering and destruction. They weep because they don't deserve these walls that they live behind.

And when Ezra is finished, Nehemiah stands before the people as they cry with bowed heads. And he says, "Do not mourn or weep. Celebrate. Eat and drink and give to your neighbor. Do not be grieved. For the joy of the Lord is your strength."

The joy of the Lord is your strength. Not, your joy is your strength. The joy of the Lord is your strength. His joy strengthens you.

It was God's joy to bring his people back to Jerusalem. It was God's joy to allow them to rebuild the temple. It was God's joy to make the walls of Jerusalem rise again. And that joy gave them strength.

They read God's Law and it made them weep. As it should. God's Law gave them no joy. God's Law gives us no joy. Because when we read it, all we see is how we have failed. And it brings us to tears.

And yet, Nehemiah wanted it read to the people. He wanted it read on this day of celebration. Why? Because the fact that they were standing before these walls was proof that God had forgiven them.

It was physical evidence that God still took joy in them. That God was still strengthening them. And so it was a reason for hope in the midst of their mourning and sorrow and grief.

Roughly 500 years later, God would once again give his people physical evidence that he still takes joy in us. It would not be in great walls or a towering gates. No, it would come in the body of his Son hanging dead on a cross.

A sight that brought weeping and mourning to the women and disciples who witnessed it that Good Friday afternoon. A sight that would surely have brought us to tears if we had seen it. For it was the demonstration of God's Law, God's justice, God's wrath, poured out on his Son.

And just as God's Law brought the Israelites in Nehemiah's day to tears, so it also brings us no joy to see our Lord bearing the punishment we deserve. It gives us no joy to see how we have failed and how Christ has suffered for our failure.

And yet, it is something that we ponder in celebration. Because the fact that our Lord hung crucified on cross before us is proof that God has forgiven us. It is physical evidence that God still takes joy in us. That God is still strengthening us. It is a reason for hope in the midst of our mourning and sorrow and grief.

And it is physical evidence that keeps coming to us. In the waters of Holy Baptism, that unite us to Jesus' death and to Jesus' resurrection from the dead. In the bread and wine of Holy Communion, by which we receive Jesus' very body and blood to strengthen us in body and soul to life everlasting.

In this church, gathered today and every week as one man before the gates of God's kingdom. To hear God's Word. To hear how much we have failed him. To hear how much we should weep.

But then also to witness the joy of the Lord. To be strengthened by that joy. And then to celebrate. To eat and drink and give to anyone in need. Because our God has brought us home. And we are forever his people. Amen.