

Tell the New Old Story

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

¹all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. ²Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

⁵And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

⁸So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

It is a pleasure to be here with everyone this morning while Mike is with his family. I am incredibly extroverted so getting an opportunity to meet new people and see new places really invigorates my soul. And while I've only just started to learn a little about First Presbyterian Church, what I have learned has really piqued my curiosity.

A couple of weeks ago, I had a great meeting with Sue, Anise, Julie, and Mike. They gave me an exclusive tour of the building. I love the Noah's Ark murals in the Sunday school rooms, especially Noah cleaning the kitty litter box. I get the sense that you all have a playful sense of humor. You have versatile gathering spaces, a beautiful sanctuary, and this new projection technology will prove to be an excellent resource for the congregation. What was most surprising for me, however, excluding the moment when Mike pulled me into the men's bathroom to show me the sign that reads "Please stand closer; you're not as blessed as you think you are." (You all obviously have a healthy sense of humor.) What was most surprising was what I heard from Sue, Anise, and Julie.

"We're really open to change," they said. "We want to try new things. We think it's important to change, to experience different ways of doing things. We're open to change." A quick glance at your January newsletter confirmed the importance of this theme for the congregation. In Mike's letter he used the words "change", "new", and "fresh" repeatedly. He went so far in fact as to summarize all of 2012 as "a year filled with change at First Pres."

I hadn't expected to hear that language. It's been said that the seven most common words uttered in Church are "We've never done it that way before". You can imagine how my ears perked up when church members started talking about innovation and change. Interesting?

As our conversation continued, I caught glimpses of the history behind this desire for change. There was a time years ago in the life of First Presbyterian that was, to say the least perhaps, divisive: A disagreement about leadership and direction, a challenging interim period, and a long search for a new pastor. Even after you called Mike, the hard work wasn't over. He told me that it was, what, three or four years ago? He gathered the congregation together and said, Look, I'm gonna be real honest. If we don't change, if we don't do something different, we're gonna have to shut these doors for good.

What I've learned about First Pres., what I've just begun to catch a glimpse of, is that First Presbyterian is a church that has worked hard to rediscover and refresh its identity.

I was reading this morning's passage from the book of Nehemiah, and I was thinking about change, and as I read I started to get the sense that I was hearing a little bit of First Presbyterian's story. Listen for yourselves:

Like I told the children, Nehemiah's story happens between the temples. The Babylonian Empire laid siege to the city of Jerusalem in 586 BC. They leveled the city walls, destroyed the Temple, and led the people of Judea into exile. It is known as the Great Diaspora. As Jewish poet David Slavitt explains it, "This was the end of the House of David, which had reigned for four hundred years...We were no longer Judaeans or Israelites: we had become Jews." What Slavitt means is that after the destruction of the temple, God's chosen people were no longer a sovereign nation with a unified religious identity and a place to call home. Like Abraham and Moses before them, they were once again vagabonds and strangers in a foreign land.

For 50 years that's how they lived, scattered across the Babylonia. Until the Persian Empire and King Cyrus arrived on the scene. It is said that Cyrus conquered Babylon without a fight, that the people of the great city simply opened their gates for the Persian king and welcomed him as a savior. Cyrus was certainly a different emperor. As a political policy, he was comfortable with multiple religions in the land. There are artifacts, in fact, that boast of Cyrus as one to whom the gods spoke, telling him to return the foreign peoples to their lands. On one of these artifacts, Cyrus himself speaks saying, "I brought the gods back into their sanctuaries." That's how the return from exile began, an Emperor's official decree and an 800 mile long migration back to the impoverished and desolated land of Judea.

The book of Ezra records that two men were appointed to lead the trek, Zerubbabel and Jeshua. When they arrived in Jerusalem they set about re-construction of the ruined temple. Ezra, the priest, led the people in their religious practice and Nehemiah inspired the building of the city's wall. The people worked hard, *yet it could never be what it was before*. **The walls weren't as full as they used to be, there just weren't enough people around. The economy was in tatters and the political landscape was uncertain, if not threatening. Moreover, the people were tired.**

This is the climactic moment we arrive at today in the text. It is a moment ripe with change, a historic moment that calls for a new direction, a new identity. In this moment something unique occurs in the book of Nehemiah, the PEOPLE take center stage. In Nehemiah 8, the Hebrew word for "people" occurs 15 times in 18 verses. The expression "all the people" occurs eleven times. The religious authorities and the political figures that had been central to the action, give way to the call of the people. And the people call for the book.

I brought my great grandfather's old Bible with me today. I keep it in my night stand at home. It's not something I take out very often, but I thought today would be appropriate. When I read it, I remember him and I remember the world he grew up in. He made his life on the railroad in Central Pennsylvania, coal trains that ran down to Philadelphia and Baltimore. He retired to Florida and lived off his pension and Social Security checks. He lived in a different world than the one I know. The railroad tracks he worked have been turned into bike paths, and I'm fairly confident that I'll never see a

Social Security check in my life time. And that's not even a sliver of the difference. I am certain that my great grandfather wouldn't know what to do with television shows like Glee. And he wouldn't believe that "minorities" are about to become the **majority** in the United States; nor would he understand how the coal he transported fundamentally changed our global climate. It's a new and different world we live in.

What amazes me, then, when I hold this leather-bound, yellowed-paged book is that the same God-inspired stories that spoke meaning into his life, speak meaning into mine. **That these old, old stories somehow become new, old stories, capable of speaking truth to a new time and a new place.**

The people of Israel experienced a loss on a scale far greater than I hope we ever know, uprooted from their land, torn away from their sacred space, and deprived of their political freedom. Tossed upon a landscape that was utterly different, they found a new way to be God's holy people. They became a people of the Book, ingesting the stories of God's covenant love, etching the Law of Moses on their hearts. **They received the old, old stories and gave them sense for a new time and place.** They made them new, old stories.

This is our call as well: to tell the stories of God's love with our lives so that they make sense to a new generation. This certainly requires a new way of telling the story, but it requires a new way of understanding as well. Are you ready, congregation, to tell these new, old stories, to ingest them, to let them form your life so thoroughly that you embody God's Good News for this new time and place?

I leave you with this word from Isaiah, spoken to a community of courageous people of faith on the frontier of change:

Thus says the Lord: See, I am about to do a new thing. Behold, it springs forth. Amen