**Sunday, October 18th, 2020**

**Nehemiah 8:1-8**

It was Christmas Eve.

Finally, little Jamie and young Sally were in bed asleep.

At last, Mom had finished baking cookies,

          and wrapping gifts, and filling stockings.

Dad was not so fortunate, Sally's new doll house still had to be put together.

And then there was Jamie's bicycle, complete with training wheels,

          which had to be assembled.

All of the parts, for both the doll house and the bike,

          were spread around the living room.

The directions were sitting on the coffee table, covered with bicycle parts.

It was getting late and Dad didn't have time to read and figure out instructions.

He knew what a bicycle looked like.

And how hard could a simple doll house be?

Out came the tools and Dad got to work.

Part after part was put in place, and finally there stood a bicycle.

Dad stood back to admire his work.

Then he attacked the doll house.

Piece after piece was placed in the construction.

And finally, there was a house, complete with furnishings and people.

Exhausted he went to bed.

It seemed like Dad's head had barely touched the pillow,

          when Sally and Jamie raced into the bedroom and woke them up,

          so they could see what Santa brought.

Jamie raced down the stairs and stopped and stared.

There was the beautiful red bike he wanted, with a bell, and everything!

Sally was right behind him, and she, too, stopped and stared.

There was the fantastic doll house she wanted,

          complete with furniture, people, and even curtains at the windows.

Jamie ran to his bike, hopped on, and began to ride around the living room.

But before he reached the far wall, the bike fell apart while he was riding it.

Sally didn't do any better.

While she was rearranging the furniture, the house collapsed into dozens of pieces.

Both children began to cry.

Mom diverted the children's attention with other gifts and breakfast.

Dad dug out the toolbox and spent the whole day

          doing what he ought to have done the first time – following the directions.

Like the bike and doll house, our lives have a tendency to fall apart

          and get tangled up when we fail to follow the directions God gives us.

Yet God knows how difficult and contrary we humans are.

He gave us clear directions about how we ought to live.

But so often we ignore his instructions and live our way.

And eventually things fall apart.

This is the lesson which the Israelites learned in this morning's reading.

They had disobeyed God, and worshipped idols, and lived their own way,

          until God allowed a foreign country to attack and carry them off into slavery.

Many years later God had arranged for them to return to Jerusalem.

The temple had been destroyed, the walls of the city were broken down,

          and the gates had been burned to ashes.

The people labored for years, restoring the temple,

          and rebuilding the walls and the gates.

But life still wasn't right.

So the people gathered together near the Water Gate,

          a sign of cleansing and renewal.

They asked Ezra, the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of Moses,

          which instructed the people how they were to live as God's people.

We can easily imagine the scene:

A large crowd of people, silently watched as Ezra ascended

          a newly built platform in the square so they could all see him.

Ezra opened the scroll, and the people all stood up.

Ezra read from the scroll from early morning until midday.

And the people listened attentively.

Other Levites circulated throughout the crowd,

          explaining and interpreting what God's Word was teaching them.

They praised God, hands lifted high; then they bowed down, faces in the dirt.

And all the people wept for their sinfulness and rebellion against God.

The law Ezra read was very ancient,

          but that day it had new meaning for all the people.

The temple had been their center of worship.

Their temple, with all its jewels and splendor, was still important,

          but from this time on, they increasingly

          studied God's law and tried to obey it.

From this time on, the Jews became known as the People of the Book.

The Israelites found their unique strength, not in government,

          not in worship rituals, but in reverence for God's written word.

They turned to another source of power: the Word of God.

The splendor of jewels and crowns was replaced

          by a single man atop a wooden platform, reading from a simple scroll.

The words he read, carefully explained to all,

          showed their power in the way they affected those who heard them.

The power of the Word of God moved the people to praise God,

          to weep over their sins, to change their behavior,

          and to make renewed promises to God.

The people became known as the people of the book,

          as a result of their interest in the book,

          because of their joy in the book,

          because they respected the book,

          and they found the book to be instructive.

We, too, are People of the book.

There is no way to overestimate the power of the Word of God.

There is a great importance in opening the Book,

          in reading it,

                    and in hearing it,

                              and particularly in doing it.

But be warned:   This Book is habit-forming.

          Regular use causes loss of anxiety,

                    decreased appetite for lying, cheating, stealing, hating.

Symptoms include: increased sensations of love, peace, joy, and compassion.

AMEN