

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10 "From the Scrolls" Rev. Janet Chapman 1/26/25

Ten-year-old Jill had been bragging to everyone in Sunday School that she knew the Bible better than everyone else. So the teacher asked her several questions, but the prideful girl couldn't answer any of them correctly. Finally, the teacher caught on to Jill's boasting, realizing it was masking her insecurity about how much she didn't know. So the sympathetic teacher tried to come up with an easier biblical question and asked who had been thrown into the lion's den and survived? Jill paused and carefully thought for a moment. Her eyes brightened and exclaimed, "I know this one; it was Tarzan!"

Then there is the true story of an English teacher at St. Paul's School in Concord, New Hampshire who used to write a syndicated column called "Looking at Language." In one of his columns, Mr. Lederer quoted some of the real-life statements, bloopers, that came from the 8th grade thru college freshman level English classes he had taught which put a whole new understanding to not just the Bible but human history. They included: "Noah's wife was named Joan of Ark...Samson slayed the Philistines with the axe of the apostles...Moses went up on Mount Cyanide to get the 10 Amendments...The 7th Commandment is thou shalt not admit adultery... Moses died before he ever reached Canada... Joshua led the Hebrews in the battle of Geritol... Solomon had 300 hundred wives and 700 porcupines... Jesus gave us the Golden Rule which says to do one to others before they do one to you... The people who followed the Lord were called the 12 Decibels... The epistles were the wives of the apostles... and Matthew's profession was taxi man." And herein lies the argument for increased biblical literacy and interpretation. Therefore, you will rarely catch me speaking about anything that doesn't relate to, and help us better understand, scripture. The Bible is filled with stories of people who have met God. Those people are our people. Their stories are our stories. Dr. David Jones notes that, "We read these stories because we want to remember who God is, who we are, and what we believe, so that we will know how to live."

In a novel entitled 100 Years of Solitude, Gabriel Garcia Marquez tells the story of a small town in South America. The name of the town was Macondo, and it was surrounded by a swamp, which accounted for its solitude. One day a little girl wandered into Macondo. She was fleeing her village, where there had been an outbreak of a

plague that caused insomnia; all those affected couldn't sleep. A family in Macondo took her in and later noticed that one of their daughters couldn't sleep; the plague had followed the little girl into Macondo. At first, people believed the plague wouldn't be too bad, because if you can't sleep, you have lots of time to do other things. But soon they discovered a disturbing symptom of the plague, a growing loss of memory. People began to forget things, such as the names of tools they worked with and where they put them. They fought this memory loss by marking things with their respective names so that all they had to do was read the inscription to identify the items: table, chair, clock, door, wall, pan, cow, pig, and so on. But pretty soon, it occurred to them that they might forget what those things were for. So they made the signs more elaborate. The sign around the cow's neck read, "This is a cow. She must be milked every morning so that she will produce milk, and the milk must be boiled before mixing with coffee; you like coffee and milk." To ensure that they never forgot where they were, the people erected a sign where the road emerged from the swamp. The sign read, "This is the village of Macondo." And on the main street, where everyone would see it, they erected a larger sign that read, "God exists." Thus, they went on living, Marquez wrote, in a reality captured momentarily in words that described what was most necessary for life. But eventually that reality was lost forever when the people forgot the meaning of the letters and how to read.

The dismal situation of Macondo is not unlike the situation Nehemiah describes in chapter 8. You see, centuries earlier, God had given the Israelites some wonderful gifts: land, security, abundance, prosperity. First Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman writes that the memory of those gifts and that relationship was the glue that bound the Israelites together. It kept them close to God, reliant upon God, and responsive to God. But as the years passed, the people grew careless and cynical about their faith. Brueggeman explains that "Prosperity causes amnesia." Think about that for a moment. Prosperity causes amnesia. When we compare what we have now compared to what our grandparents had in the 1930's, what dangers exist for us? People with amnesia don't know who they are, what they're expected to do, or to whom they are accountable. This goes a long way toward explaining how the Israelites ended up being overrun and carted off to Babylonia, where they spent 50 years in exile. By

the time Cyrus the Great told them they could go home, many of them had forgotten most of what they had known about their faith. Their return to Jerusalem was a crushing disappointment; the great temple was a mound of rubble, the countryside was a wasteland, the Persians still dominated and taxed them heavily, external enemies still threatened them, and internal divisions and injustices still put neighbor against neighbor. They needed guidance and assurance. The rebuilding of Jerusalem was exhausting but once the temple was rebuilt, Nehemiah invited people near and far to come reclaim their faith and identity. They gathered at the WaterGate, a central gathering place where thousands could congregate. Ezra brought out the scrolls which he had kept safe in Babylonia that contained the first 5 books of the Bible. He began to read the stories of creation, of Noah and the ark, of Abraham and Sara, Joseph and the coat of many colors, of Miriam and Moses, being freed from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, the 10 Commandments, and God's other instructions for creating a community. The stories were written in Hebrew, but by then the Israelites were speaking Aramaic, the language of the Persian empire. So Ezra translated the stories into everyday language so they could understand. Meanwhile, 13 priests circulated among the people to "give instruction in what was read, to explain the meaning as they heard it."

That is the point of reading scripture, to get the meaning it has for you, to see in the stories something that applies to someone you know, even yourself. That was the hope of the Israelites as they listened to Ezra read the entire day. Those former exiles saw themselves in the story God had composed and was still writing. They had forgotten so much about their faith that there was this huge gap between the way God wanted them to live and the way they were living. A sense of loss and shame overwhelmed them and they broke down in tears. But Ezra said, "Don't grieve, don't cry. This is a day of remembering who we are and who God is. Go home, prepare a feast, and share it with those who don't have anything. Because this day is holy to God, and the joy of the Lord is your strength." Think of this as the very first mission statement for the people of God, what it means to be the church – Remember who we are, remember who God is, gather at the table, share with others who have less, recognize what is holy and sacred, and let the joy of the Lord be your strength.

Nehemiah's account ends with the people celebrating and sharing gifts of food and drink, because their long season of amnesia was over. From the scrolls, they recognized themselves once more. From the scrolls, they discovered their purpose. From the scrolls, they found joy, more than happiness. C.S. Lewis describes joy as "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his or her power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world." It is a divine gift to receive rather than a selfish goal to pursue...all on full display from the scrolls. So when folks ask me about the point in reading the Bible, if it's really worth the bother, I try to encourage them to see the bigger picture. As Brian McLaren says, the Bible teaches us what's true and right, helps us see where we've gone wrong, guides us on how to get on the right track again, and educates us in the skills of staying on the right path. You will know you are getting somewhere when you begin to see yourself in what you're reading and when you begin to involve biblical teachings in the decisions you make about public and private issues, instead of just being led by your own whims and preferences.

Ultimately, it was Jesus who modelled for us the importance of reading from the scrolls as he returns from the wilderness after his baptism. Jesus enters his hometown and Luke gives us the first public words out of his mouth which come from the scroll of Isaiah. Jesus reads, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor," and then Jesus explained to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it." Like Jesus, will **you** find **yourself** in the scrolls?