

27 January 2013
Epiphany 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Delight in the Lord of the Exodus”
Text: Nehemiah 8:1-10; Luke 4:16-30

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Old Testament reading for today was from Nehemiah. I'll bet most of you don't know much about Nehemiah. So let me tell you, briefly, some context. Nehemiah was one of the leaders of the Jewish people returning from their exile in Babylon. They had been there for 70 long years, living among strange people in a strange land with a strange culture, strange language, strange food, and strange gods. The Temple had been looted and then destroyed, followed quickly by all of Jerusalem. Those who were lucky got taken away before witnessing the full and complete destruction of their beloved city. It was all reduced to rubble. For 70 years. One year for each of the sabbath rests they failed to give the land. For, you see, they no longer knew God's Word. Even worse, they no longer really knew God. They had been lured away to false gods and false beliefs. And so God disciplined them. It was severe, but loving. For their good. So that they would turn back to Him and live.

And so after the 70 years are completed, God brings His people back. They rebuild Jerusalem and its walls and the Temple. But what really needed to be rebuilt were the people, and their faith, and their *identity*. They needed to learn again who they were as God's people. And they needed to learn again of their gracious and faithful God, who had never left them or forsaken them, even as He disciplined them.

And so to learn that, the Book of the Law of Moses was read to them. That's a way of saying the first five books of the Old Testament. And what the people heard both stunned and delighted them. So much so that in response to what they heard, ***all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.***

Now, what was it that they heard that caused such a response? Well first they heard of how God had specially created them. In the creation stories they heard in Babylon, man didn't matter; man was insignificant; men were mere pawns in the competition between the many gods of the earth and creation. But now they heard something very different - that they were the very crown of God's creative labors! They heard of Adam and Eve, each specially formed, each in the image of God.

And that creation isn't arbitrary or a survival of the fittest competition, but specially made for them, to use and to enjoy. And that men and women are not simply accidents or pawns, here today and gone tomorrow, but significant and special to God their Father. A message, I think, people need to hear today as well.

Then they heard of sin, of Adam and Eve's rebellion, but *even more* of God's grace and mercy in not destroying them or rejecting them, but promising them a Saviour - someone who would do to satan what satan had done to them. They heard how that promise was passed down through the generations, through Seth and Shem and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They heard how God brought His people up out of their slavery and captivity in Egypt, how He then graciously dwelled with His people in the Tabernacle, and finally brought them into the land, just as He had promised. They heard the ups and downs, the sin and failure, but then always - *always!* - of God's steadfast love and faithfulness through it all.

And in hearing all this, they realized: not only had this happened in the past, it had just happened to *them*. *They* were back in the land, back in the city, back with the Temple. What God had done then He had done again now. They were the heirs of His promises; of His steadfast love and faithfulness. Yes! This is who they are, their identity. And this is who God is. And hearing all this, *they were stunned and delighted*. *Overjoyed* may be a better word for it. And so they cried out their *Amen!* in agreement and faith.

But while all that *was* great - no doubt! - it was just a precursor, a foreshadowing, of what God would come to do for us in His Son. Our deliverance not just from an Egypt or a Babylon, but from sin, death, and the devil, and rest He came to bring us.

And so not unlike Nehemiah and Ezra, when Jesus goes back to His hometown and goes to Church, He stands up to read the Word of the Lord. For just like Nehemiah and Ezra, He has good news for the people. Wonderful news that should both *stun* and *delight* them! So He opens up the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and reads those words we heard today:

***“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”***

And then He speaks the most stunning words of all: ***Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*** Yes, the time had come for God to fulfill all His promises.

The exoduses from Egypt and Babylon were small potatoes compared to the exodus God was doing now in Jesus. For really not only *this* Scripture, but *all* Scripture was now being fulfilled in Him.

But the people of Nazareth didn't react in quite the same way as the people in Nehemiah's day. Instead of crying out their **Amen!** and **bowing their heads** and **worshipping Him with their faces to the ground** - a description which reminds us of what the wise men did, as we heard at the beginning of this Epiphany season - instead of doing that, their response was: ***Is not this Joseph's son?*** A question that was not so much of doubt as it was of expectation, that the healings and miracles that Jesus had been doing in other places had finally come home to roost! *And surely even more.* For this is His hometown, we are His people. Surely He has come home to take care of His own! They didn't want an exodus; they wanted goodies.

But their delight quickly turns to wrath and rage when Jesus tells them that's not what He's come to do. So instead of worshiping Him, they want to kill Him. Throw Him down the cliff, that ungrateful, lousy, no good excuse for a son of Mary and Joseph.

Like the people in Nehemiah's day, *they had forgotten.* Forgotten God's Word. Forgotten who they were. Forgotten the promises of God. Forgotten what they really needed . . . But instead of rejoicing in God's Word - as the people in Nehemiah's day - they turned against God and His Saviour, and we hear what has to be one of the saddest sentences in Scripture: ***But passing through their midst, he went away.***

Well here's the thing to take away from this, the thing for you and me today: *we're all on an exodus.* Israel was 400 years in Egypt, then 70 years in Babylon. How long will you and I be here in this world and life? 70 years? Maybe 100 years? And then what? Do we look to God to give us goodies for this short time (and maybe get angry when He doesn't give us what we want), or do we look for Him to lead us to something better? Do we want to live the same old life that ends in death, or live a new life now, that not even death can end?

For that is the exodus that Jesus has come to provide for you - an exodus from the old to the new, from captivity to freedom; an exodus from sin through death to a new life. An exodus that all the Scriptures are telling us and promising us, that we, like the people in Nehemiah's day, might know who we are, even more who God is, and rejoice in His faithfulness and goodness to us. His faithfulness and goodness manifested, or revealed, or *epiphanied* to us most fully in Jesus. That He has come for *our* exodus. That He is the life of the world.

That's the truth Jesus wanted the people He grew up with in His hometown to know

and rejoice in; the truth He wants us and all people to know and rejoice in. That God, in His faithfulness and goodness, became man to set us free from sin and death. Or as part of an ancient liturgy once put it: in Jesus, *the magnificent exchange that restores our nature has now been manifested. From the old man a new man arises and from mortality immortality, as the human condition is healed with a remedy wrought from that same human condition; and from a race subject to sin a child innocent of all sin is born. Not only is undying honor done our weak nature when your Word, O God, makes it his own, but through his marvelous sharing with us we ourselves become eternal.*

Or in other words, God has entered our flesh, our sin, and our death, in order to lead us in *our great exodus*. We will, in fact, hear those very words from Jesus' mouth in two weeks when we celebrate the Transfiguration of our Lord. For when He there reveals His glory and Moses and Elijah appear with Him, Luke tells us they were talking about *His exodus*. The exodus of His death, resurrection, and ascension, which, in providing us the forgiveness of our sins provides us an exodus of our own. *For where there is forgiveness of sins there is also life and salvation* (Small Catechism).

That exodus becomes yours when, like the people of Israel in their exodus who miraculously passed through the waters of the Red Sea, our Lord miraculously brings you through the waters of Holy Baptism, makes you His own and forgives your sins.

Then, like the people of Israel, our Lord provides for your journey with the preaching of His Word, that you not forget who you are and whose you are and the steadfast goodness and faithfulness of your Lord, who has provided for the ongoing forgiveness of your sins through His Gospel and Absolution.

And then like the people in Nehemiah's day, our Lord bids you also ***eat and drink . . . for this day is holy to our Lord . . . for the joy of the Lord is your strength.*** Yes, the very Body and Blood of Jesus given us here to eat and to drink to give us joy and strength.

And so every time you heard these words - all these words: *I baptize you, I forgive you, I love you, take and eat, take and drink, you are mine* - **be both stunned and delighted!** What has happened in the past has happened here for you. God is speaking *to you*. All this the Lord has for you and gives to you through His Son.

To you. Specifically you. Especially you. That's why all these things are intensely personal. The water of baptism poured on your head, the words of absolution spoken to you, the Body and Blood of Christ placed into your mouth. For Jesus doesn't just come even now to save *the world* - He comes to save you. He loves

you. He died for you.

That why (if I may say it this way) God doesn't have a web site, a Facebook account, or a Twitter feed - **He has a church**. A people, St. Paul said, that He has joined to Himself in baptism and feeds with His Body and Blood and who are *His Body*. That where you are He is, and where He is you are. No longer separated by sin, but now one again. For so it was in the beginning. And best of all: so now it is again, in Jesus.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

(Some of the thoughts about the reading from Nehemiah and the quotation from an ancient liturgy from Dr. Dean Wenthe in Concordia Pulpit Resources, Vol. 23, part 1, p. 32-34.)