

## REMEMBERED

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

January 24, 2010

Scripture: Nehemiah 8:1-10; Luke 4:14-21

It was a day 2400 years ago. No one here remembers it, of course. But then, memory failed that day too. Which is probably why Nehemiah put it in his diary, so it wouldn't be forgotten... what happened there by the Water Gate. It wasn't long after the exiles had returned to the Holy City, Jerusalem that it happened.

The days in Babylon still fresh in their memory, they had sojourned in a foreign land and while it had not necessarily been the worst Israel had ever experienced, it was not easy either and certainly not home. Bel and Nebo were the gods of the foreigners, not the God of the Covenant, the God of Israel's ancestors Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

In Babylon they had married local women, Babylonians, succumbing to the charms of their beauty and mystique, as men will do. It was a problem they would have to face once they returned to Jerusalem, those foreign wives.

Fifty years had passed, a generation or two by any reckoning, but at last, once again, they stood in Jerusalem's gate. The walls of the city lay in ruin when they first came back. They had their work cut out for them repairing the watchtowers, rebuilding the gardens, reopening the markets, restoring the gates. It was a task they set about with eagerness.

At long last they were home again. And eventually the walls were repaired, the neighborhoods were safe, the vines were planted, the city seemed at peace. Yet, something was missing. Something was incomplete.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Nehemiah we see the people Israel, their hands calloused from the work that they had done on the city's wall and infrastructure, their arms tired from working the mortar and pointing the stones, and leveling the edges. There they were, these weary people, having survived so much, ready for what might come next. And it was then that the people remembered what it was that they had forgotten. They could not remember their story, their story intertwined with God's story, they couldn't remember how that story went.

As James Sanders, the Old Testament scholar has affirmed, "God has a story, too, and it is [God's] story which is our real purpose in being."<sup>1</sup>

Israel must have sensed that. There they were again in Jerusalem, and yet the heart and soul of it was not recovered. They could not remember who they were, or why they were building, or the meaning of what had happened to them while they were in exile. For all of their work to restore their life now returned to the land which was theirs, they lacked a story on which to hang their lives and a vision of the God in whose grace they lived.

A friend tells about his young daughter who never tires of getting out the family photo album and thumbing through the old pictures of him and his wife. She wants to hear the story and see the pictures before they met, when they met, getting married, pregnant with her, and after she arrived. “Daddy, tell me the story again of how you and mommy met.” And they sit together and remember the story that they have recited so many times before that the daughter can correct her father if he leaves out any of the details. We have to know from whence we came in order to know where we are going.

What Israel lacked as it returned to Jerusalem was a story to define it, a picture album of the meeting and courtship and relationship between them and God. Something to point to, and thumb through that could weave together their history and identity with God.

So they asked to hear the scriptures once again, to thumb through the pictures and hear how they had met, a recitation of the holy history. It wasn't Ezra who said, “Come, let us have Bible Study.” Not by a long shot. Nehemiah's notes make it clear who asked what of whom.

*When the seventh month came – the people of Israel being settled in their towns – all the people gathered 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.*

The Water Gate was a good place to meet because of what it was not. It was not the temple, and because it was not, they all could come, men and women and even children could gather there, the holy and unholy, the priests and the paupers, the washed and the unwashed, they all could come because there was no Holy of Holies forbidden to enter, no temple precincts to set off the clean from the unclean. By the Water Gate they all could stand and listen to the words of scripture. And that's what they did.

Most scholars say it was the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible that were read that day, in whatever form and shape it was. Scrolls no doubt, unrolled and read page by page.

They started out with chapter one, verse one. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” They read on. They read about the creation of the first man and woman. They read about dysfunction in the family and how Cain killed Abel out of jealousy. They read the story of Noah and the flood, and the covenant that followed. They read about the tower of Babel, and the scattering of the people and the languages they spoke. They remembered Abraham, and Sarah, and Hagar and Ishmael, and Isaac.

They heard the story of their slavery in Egypt, and the Exodus that led them out. They read about the parting of the sea and the wanderings in the wilderness. They read the story of Moses, all the way to the point where at the end of Deuteronomy he looks out upon the Promised Land from Mt. Nebo, the land as it turned out promised to his people, a land which he would never enter, only see from afar, and then die.

They read till noon and all day long there by the Water Gate. And standing with him Nehemiah says, were Mattithaiah, and Shema, Anaiah, and Uriah, and Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right. Along with Mishael and Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam on his left. They stood up for the reading, and bowed their heads in worship, and some mumbled “Amen, Amen” every now and then, the notes of Nehemiah say.

And while Ezra was reading, some of the priests were explaining things to the people, offering color commentary, background interpretation and understanding. These were Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiiah, all Levites, the priestly families of Israel. Nehemiah says they gave the sense of the reading to the people so that they could understand it. He named all of them and remembered that they were there, tongue twister names and all.

So Nehemiah concludes, they read from the book, from the law of God, *with interpretation*. ...That’s what we call worship! And that was the birth of preaching.

From that moment on, Israel would be defined not by statehood, nor by ethnicity, nor even by its Temple worship, but rather by its claim and commitment to the law of Moses, to the Torah.

Now you would think that they would have had fireworks that night, a big barbecue, dancing and a celebration. After all they have been exiled for fifty years, and this was the first time that they had heard their story read from the scrolls in fifty years. People were defined by that book and rooted in it, but some of them had not heard it until that day. A whole generation had grown up without it. A celebration would be perfectly understandable if they had had one.

But instead, the reaction of the people was to cry, to weep at the story they heard. They might have applauded, called for a festival, killed the fatted calf, fallen on their faces and praised God, or given a shout out to the Almighty, but no, what they did was cry. And I wonder why they cried? What in this ritual, in this hearing of scripture was so sad?

Reading the Bible in worship doesn’t usually make us cry, save perhaps at a funeral, or maybe a wedding, those moments when our lives are most cracked open and receptive. But at the Water Gate that day they cried.

Maybe they cried for the same reason that we cry when we see a movie that moves us, a scene of pathos that touches our emotions or something that so engulfs us in a wave of memory that we see ourselves in that situation and know that feeling, or remember that time out of our own experience, a common connection of empathy.

This past week, there was a woman named Janette who was pulled out of the wreckage and debris of a supermarket in Port au Prince. Her husband, Roger, was watching the backhoe dig through the cement pillars and rebar that stuck up out of the ground. With each shovel full of debris removed from the area of the collapse, the

husband would rush in to dig with his fingers and look and listen for the sound of his wife. He would call into the pile of rubble and wait... and then step back.

Another dig of the shovel would clear a break in the debris, and the husband would rush in again and dig with his fingers and repeat the ritual all over again.

Finally, after one particular dig, there was an air hole that was created and a voice was heard. The husband leaned in and called his wife's name. And he thought he heard her. Six days she had been buried, and he thought he heard her! Everyone hushed to listen and he called her name... "Janette", and she answered. She had a message for him, "Even if I die," she said, "I love you so much, please don't forget me." There remained a danger that the back hoe, in removing debris, could very well have caused a collapse that would crush her if things went badly, so she wanted him to know before anything else happened that she loved him.

And I watched that story unfold and I saw the fear on that husband's face, and I thought of the way we all share that predicament of needing to say to someone that we love them, not knowing when and how and by what circumstance we may or we may never get to say that again.

And I felt the tears forming in my eyes. Because that story touched my story, and for a moment our humanity and common life were one.

That's why they cried there at the Water Gate. Because the story of Israel, the love story that they were hearing was their story and God's story, lives and stories intertwined. A story that started in a garden and led them to a desert, and offered them a covenant, and sustained them in slavery, and led them to a promised land, and upheld them in captivity and now was restoring them to Jerusalem.

They cried because they knew that story. They had lived that story. They were that story.

And maybe they cried because they remembered somewhere deep inside them that there was a night one time, long ago, as my fellow Moveable Feaster and friend, Tom Are, has suggested,<sup>2</sup> that night when God and Abraham, their grandfather's grandfather's grandfather stood out under the stars together and looked at the heavens, and God said Abraham's descendants would be as many as the stars in the sky and as vast as the sand at the seashore, and through his descendants God would bless all the nations of the earth.<sup>3</sup>

As they stood there, out under the stars, they began to name them, those stars in the sky, like Adam had named the animals of the earth long before; Abraham and God began to name the stars and so the descendants. Names like Mattithiah and Shema, and Uriah and Hilkiah, and Akkub and Shabbethai, Zechariah and Meshullam. The people who stood with Ezra, survivors of the Captivity, stars in the heavens, every one with a name, as many as the stars above us, as many as the sand at the seashore.

And maybe the people's tear stained faces that day at the Water Gate expressed the hope that their frail efforts at faithfulness in the shadow of exile, rebuilding the city,

and mending its walls, and replanting its gardens and restoring its gates meant that there would be names yet to come long after Ezra and Mattithiah and Shema and Anaiah; names like Matthew and Mary Magdalene, and Thomas the doubting one, James the son of Alphaeus, Peter who had been known as Simon, and Mary who went to the tomb, and John who was the beloved disciple.

And the names like the stars would be countless and someday include names like Origen and Tertullian and Crysostom and Augustine, Susanna the Martyr and in time Martin and John and Ulrich, and names like Sojourner and Harriet, Dietrich and Oscar, Harry Emerson and William Sloane, Margaret Towner and Esther Morrow.

By grace the names would be as numerous as the stars of heaven; Gary and Sally, Betty and Al, Nancy and Cara, Joe and Sarah, Heide and Pietro, Stephan and Holly, Janette and Roger, and you know the others, all the names, as many as the stars in the sky and as numerous as the sand at the seashore.

Generation by generation the stars bore their names. They may shine for only a night, but there has never been a night when the world could do without them. The Word is “for all the people” but it shows up in history name by name. For what is the Word of God if no one understands it as their own Word, the story of God intertwining with their story?

There are a lot of difficult names in the Old Testament lesson today, names like Mattithiah and Malchijah, and Hash-baddanah, and Shabbethai. I didn’t want the lay reader to have to worry about stumbling on the names. I just decided I would read them, not because my Hebrew name pronunciation is flawless, but because what I lack in accuracy, I can make up in conviction. One thing for sure, I didn’t want any of the names not to be read, just because they are hard. We can’t forget any of the names. They are all so important, even if we never knew them, even if they twist our tongue. There are so many people buried in the debris today, so many people, and all of them have a name. God knows their name, and they are remembered.

There are a lot of names in the Bible, some of them are hard to say, and some are easy, and some of them are ours... our names. Our names are there in one way or another because our story is caught up in God’s story; God’s story and ours.

And maybe that’s enough to make us all either cry or dance, I don’t know which, but I do know that all of us are there, all of us are known, and none of us is forgotten. All are remembered.

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<sup>1</sup> **God Has a Story Too: Sermons in Context.** (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979)

<sup>2</sup> I have borrowed liberally from Tom's Moveable Feast paper where he expositis this text beautifully. Some of the phrases included in the following paragraph are quoted substantially from that paper even though I have adapted some sentences with my own turns of phrase. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ordinary, Moveable Feast 2010 meeting in Chapel Hill, NC. Paper unpublished.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 22:17-18