

Oregon City United Methodist Church
18955 S. South End Road
Oregon City, OR 97045

Rev. Michael Benischek
503-522-9807
June 7, 2020

Series: Our series of Online Worships
Sermon: Welcome Back!

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 10-17

all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

2 So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. 3 He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

5 Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. 6 Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

10 Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

11 The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve."

12 Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.

13 On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the teacher to give attention to the words of the Law. 14 They found written in the Law, which the Lord had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in temporary shelters during the festival of the seventh month 15 and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: "Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters"—as it is written.

16 So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves temporary shelters on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. 17 The whole company that had returned from exile built temporary shelters and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.

18 Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

Storyteller

Here's a question I get a lot nowadays. When can we go back to normal? Are you asking about the protests and racial tension in our nation? I hope we don't go back to normal. Normal seemed to work fine for me, but I'm a white protestant straight male. Normal didn't work for a lot of people. I'm upset at the looting and vandalism, but I should be more upset about injustice, deaths, and the fact that this Land of the Free has the most jailed

citizens in the world. If African Americans and Hispanics were incarcerated at the same rates as whites, prison and jail populations would decline by almost 40%. I don't have an answer, but my family and I are participating in rallies this week because it's better to do something rather than nothing.

When can we go back to normal?

Are you asking about in-building worship? Not for a while. Clackamas County has clarified their steps and phases. Our Bishop and Conference has clarified their steps and phases. We are formulating our own five steps and phases to incorporate these realities. We are in our Phase 1 now. Here are some harsh facts about Phase 3 when we can get back together:

1. The congregation will be maxed out at 50. Sitting in family groups away from others. We may have two services, and we may take "reservations" and check everybody in for contact tracing.
2. NO meet and greet time, Sunday School, nursery, up-front children's time, coffee/snack cart, food (Communion qualifies as food – even drive up is not allowed right now).
3. NO live singing or wind/brass instruments. This one breaks my heart.
4. Building use and rules will be different. One door for entrance, another for exit. Everyone in masks. Please use the bathroom before you come, because we have to sanitize the stall after each use ("Go Before You Go"). No water fountains. Stack your chair when you're done because the next service will use new chairs. Basically, we're asking folk not to touch anything. Attendance pads and prayer cards will be electronic and handled differently. We won't even pass an offering plate!

Doesn't sound like normal, does it. Hopefully these phases will be short-lived. Phases 4 will be a less restrictive stage and Phase 5 is pretty much back to normal. Leaders, church council and staff will keep clarifying each stage of reopening as we are able. We will communicate through our newsletter, email, Facebook, and website at our progress – and we will send out snail mail to all when we can move to another phase – and the expectations/needs thereof.

The nation of Israel was wondering when they could get back to NORMAL. Here's the backdrop: Nehemiah was the governor of the region around Jerusalem around 500 B.C. 500 years before Jesus. Throughout the story of the Jewish people, there were up times and there were down times. They were in slavery, down time. They were rescued, up time! They wandered in the desert, down time, they came to the promised land, up time! They had national emergencies, down time, they bonded together to form a nation under King David and Solomon. Up time! They split into different kingdoms and had civil war. Down time. You see a pattern here. Bad times followed by good times followed by bad times followed by good times. Some things never change. They were captured by the Babylonians and everyone was forced into captivity hundreds of miles from home to Babylon - which happens to be around the present day city of Bagdad. Down time. After sixty years of captivity, they were allowed to go back. Sixty years later. Almost all of those who were carried away three generations ago were no longer around. All they had was legends and folklore. They were not allowed to worship as they had worshiped before. The whole idea of captivity was to reacclimate the Israelites into good Babylonian citizens. To turn them into something else. To redefine their culture. We did that with the Native American population on the Great Plains. We are taking over, if you want to continue, become like us. What do we tell the immigrant population who come from foreign lands? Become like us. Speak our language, learn our customs. Speak English. When I go to Mexico or the Carribean, what do I tell the locals? Speak English! Honestly, for immigrants, I don't care if they learn English. I do expect their children to learn. My great great grandparents spoke German. Had no interest in speaking English. But their children had to. Well, the Israelites were

expected to play along and become good Babylonians. When they were allowed to return to Jerusalem, they were at a defining moment in Israelite history. They had to decide which story they wanted to follow. They could start all over again and begin fresh with no rules, no expectations, no culture, or they could look back to the folklore of who they were once upon a time. Nehemiah was the governor and he asked Ezra the scribe, who was the keeper of the history to read from the Book of the Law. The first five books of the Old Testament. The Books of Moses. They call it the law because it has everything about the relationship between us and God. What it means to be Jewish. Actually, what it means to be Hebrew, they weren't called Jews at that time - the chosen people of God. And Ezra read from the scrolls, the stories of Adam and Eve, Abraham, their forefathers, Moses and the Exodus, the Ten Commandments and their relationship with God. Their story. Most of these people hadn't heard this stuff before. Got that? This was new to them! They were joyful. They were saddened. They were moved by the stories of their faith and they bowed down and worshiped - something that hadn't happened in decades. And Ezra gave interpretation of the law. What it all means. It's from that tradition how we get sermons - interpretation of faith. You don't listen to me because I want you to, or it's the price to pay to hear good music, but for an interpretation of what it means to be faithful. I might be right, I might be off-kilter every now and then, but hopefully you get something to think about. Ezra gave interpretation and they found out what it means to have a story, to have a faith, to have a history. There was belonging. There was meaning. There was purpose. There was relationship.

Our protests this past week have been about a people who's story is being discredited. Forgotten. Ignored. Where there majority don't want to hear about the plight of the minority. Like it or not - this isn't their story or my story - it's OUR story. And what part am I playing in this drama?

Ezra needed to read the stories of their faith, or the faith would die. They needed to be a part of something grander. Larger. They needed to hear how God was their God. And they were His people. Connection. Belonging. How well do you know the stories of our faith? How connected do you feel to the characters in our Bible? I invite you to read through the scriptures this during these days of isolation. Instead of turning on the T.V. when you don't know what else to do, open up to the Gospels. Have a look. For many of us, the stories don't mean anything to us - because we've never taken the time to look. If we take our faith story as our story, we will feel connected, belonging, and maybe, just maybe, living a life of faith helps us feel a little bit like normal. And the family of God said, Amen!