

## ***Making Sense***

A Sermon for Morning Worship with Communion  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
October 4, 2015  
Text: Nehemiah 8:1-8

This story from Nehemiah is a real gem of a story in the bible and one far too often overlooked or even ignored. It records a very significant moment in the Judeo-Christian tradition since it marks the occasion of the very first time the Scriptures are read aloud in public. This practice, as you all know and just experienced a few minutes ago, is now routine in Christian churches and Jewish synagogues and has been since this long ago event took place in roughly the 400's BCE. But on that long ago day when Ezra climbed onto the platform to read to the people from the book of God's Law, he was doing something brand new and quite momentous. And somehow, the people knew it. The text describes that, as Ezra opened the text (and since it was most likely a scroll, he probably opened it by unrolling it) – when Ezra opened the text to begin reading, the people spontaneously stood as one. Then, the text says, “Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered ‘Amen, Amen’ lifting up their hands.”

What an incredible moment that must have been! This is difficult for us to comprehend fully since we take the reading aloud of the scriptures for granted. It's just something we do. And, depending on how well the text is read, or how much it

interests us, or how many other things we have on our minds in the moment, we may or we may not, even hear the text all the way to the end. Ezra's audience, on the other hand, was so excited they just leaped to their feet, wanting God to know how the reading of the text brought God into their midst in a whole new way. They were literally hanging on every word, wanting desperately to understand what was being said since they knew it contained descriptions of God's will for their lives. God was in that moment for them in a whole new way, and they could scarcely believe it.

A little background information on this story might be helpful at this point. This public reading of the Scriptures at the "water gate" – a place scholars believe was a sort of plaza outside the Temple proper – was the culmination of a series of extraordinary events surrounding the return of the Jewish population to Jerusalem from their captivity in Babylon. The city, and the Temple along with it, had been reduced to little more than rubble about 70 years earlier when the Babylonians had finally defeated the remnants of the Jewish nation in a horrific battle. Following their defeat, the Babylonians took the majority of the city's leaders and educated elite back to Babylon as captives. There they languished trying to figure out what had happened to them. How could God's Chosen people have suffered such a fate? What did it mean to be God's people now if they no longer lived in

the holy city and could no longer worship at the Temple? Their challenges and tribulations make up much of the writings of the prophets, especially Jeremiah and Isaiah. But, for our purposes here this morning, the bottom line is that the people found a way to hold on to their faith, to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land as the Psalm says.

When a new king, Cyrus, came to the throne, he decided that it would be okay for the exiles to return to Jerusalem. Nehemiah was eventually appointed as the Jewish governor of Jerusalem, under Persian control. When Nehemiah first arrives back at the city he is devastated to see the sorry state of everything. But, he soon gets the people organized and the rebuilding begins. Today's story takes place when the reconstruction is well underway. Ezra, a religious leader among the exiles described as both a scribe and priest, is given the task of reminding the people about the laws of God by reading to them from the sacred texts which had been lost to them for generations. The story is not specific as to which part of the text Ezra is reading but since it is described as the law, it is most likely some section of the Pentateuch – the first five books of the bible. And it hardly matters which section he read to the people since they were unfamiliar with any of it. Whatever he chose to read would be new to them. And yet they recognized God's presence in their midst in a whole new way *because* of the text's reading in their midst.

Also noteworthy in this story is the fact that the text is quite clear that the people were having difficulty understanding what was being read to them so a group of religious leaders, some of them at least being Levites or hereditary priests moved among the people to make sure they understood what they were hearing. Scholars differ on what exactly this means. Were they translating the Hebrew they were hearing into the Aramaean dialect they spoke themselves? Were they actually explaining nuances of the text? It's not clear. What is clear is that every effort was made to insure that the people got what they had asked for – to hear and understand the Word of God intended for them. And make no mistake – this event happened because the people clamored for it. The people wanted to know and understand God in a whole new way that would make sense to them, in a way they could apply to their lives each day. The people wanted, needed, demanded to know more of God and that's why Ezra climbed up on that platform that day and started to read.

That's why this story is so important, I think. It reminds us how precious the Word of God is to us in the life of faith and prayer. It reminds us that just thinking our own thoughts about God is not enough, is never enough. It reminds us that the Word of God is precious and worthy of our time and attention. It reminds us that taking time to engage with, revel in, the Word of God is an act of intentionality. We have to want to do it if we are

going to do it. We have to make the first move. In other words, we have to pick up that Bible, hold it in our hands, open it and read it. Then, we need to ask questions about what we've read if there are things we don't understand. And we need to work at listening for God's words meant just for us in the moment as we read the text before us. In other words, we have to recognize the central place of Scripture in the life of faith and do what it takes to make God's Word into our Word for the living of life each day.

Wow. That's a lot to think about, isn't it. Most of us don't think about the Bible all that much. We *know* about it, of course. But do we know it as we should, maybe even as we'd like to? Most of us probably know where the Bible is at home, but how often do we pick it up and read it? Some of us do read it on a regular basis, perhaps every day, and why is that? For me, it's a devotional practice I first witnessed my mother doing when I was a little girl. I can still see her sitting at her desk, bibles and commentaries stacked around her as she sat furiously making notes for the monthly bible study she led for her "circle" group at the little Presbyterian Church we attended when I was growing up. The bible was her lifeline in the midst of a life that was often challenging for her with a husband who traveled a lot leaving her home alone with her aging, senile mother, two teenage sons and one rambunctious little daughter. The greatest gift she gave to me was my faith and I learned what it meant to live faith by watching

her live hers – in regular, daily Bible study and prayer, in groups for prayer and study at church, in worship every Sunday. In short, the Bible is important to me at least in part because it was important to her until the day she died. And for that I am forever grateful.

But what of Ezra and Nehemiah and World Communion Sunday? What does this story of the reading of sacred text in public for the first time have to do with this particular Sunday when we celebrate not the Bible itself but instead one of the key stories in the Bible – the story of the Last Supper? In a word, everything. As Jesus sat at that long ago table, sharing a meal he knew would be his last with his beloved friends, he knew they were at that table because of their shared tradition as people who knew and loved the stories of the sacred text of Judaism. In their Passover celebration around that very table, they would have reminded each other of that long past night when Moses led the slaves out of Egypt, pausing only long enough to make unleavened bread for the journey. As they sat around that table, the disciples were perhaps remembering the first time they saw Jesus unroll and read from the scroll for the people of Nazareth. Or maybe they were remembering one of the long evenings they had shared together, as Jesus explained those beloved Scriptures to them in a whole new way.

And let's not forget the Apostle Paul whose words in 1 Corinthians 11 have become the most recognized and accepted version of what are known as the Words of Institution for the sacrament of Communion. Paul was not in that Upper Room when Jesus spoke them for the first time to the disciples, and yet he knew them, knew how important they were and would be to generations to come. He wrote them to the church in Corinth because the people there were already forgetting what they meant and why they gathered for this sacred meal in the first place. Paul knew that words, written words, are so critical in transmitting the faith – the knowledge and experience of God active in history and in our lives – from one group of people to the next, from one generation to the next. Dear friends, the Bible is the lifeline which connects us back to the very earliest days of our ancestors in faith! It is a precious gift of history, of lived experience as the people of God, as testimony to the power of God in the lives of people separated by thousands of miles and thousands of years. The Bible, dear friends, is the link to what has been and what will be as we discern the will of God for our lives and our world together. May God open our minds and hearts to all the possibilities it contains. May we make the effort and take the time to read it, to study it, to cherish it, to pray it as God intended and as that long ago congregation gathered before Ezra knew instinctively. This is not a challenge for the faint of heart and it is not something easy

to do. The Bible is a long and complicated and difficult text to tackle. It is often not easy to understand, to make sense of. But I promise you, it is so worth the effort.