

Rediscovering God's Word

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
On Sabbath Circles Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
September 9, 2018
Text: Nehemiah 8:1-12

Welcome to Sabbath Circles Sunday and the first Sunday of our deep dive into some of the stories of the Old Testament! We will be spending the next 12 Sundays focusing on the people and stories of the Hebrew Scriptures. These sacred texts are filled with amazing stories about incredible people and their dramatic and direct interactions with the great “I AM THAT I AM,” whom we call God. These are foundational stories for our faith as Christians but they are the primary religious texts of the religion of Judaism, something we need always to keep in mind as we read them. We of the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – are indeed “people of the book” meaning we are people who find in these sacred scriptures our window into God and our relationship with the divine.

As I thought about this sermon series and how to proceed I quickly realized it made the most sense practically speaking to begin at the beginning which in the Bible, of course, is the book of Genesis. And, that’s where we will start next week and spend the next five weeks as a matter of fact. But, to begin with Genesis is like diving into the deep end of the pool without being completely sure you can swim. It is complex and deep, reflecting many

different traditions and writing styles and time periods as the ancient Hebrews worked to figure out who they were and how they came to have this amazing God in their lives. All of the stories we will be looking at are foundational stories to Judaism, and therefore to Christianity as well. They are rich in both detail and nuance and offer much for us to consider and explore together. But, they are so much more than good stories. Just like for the ancient Hebrew people, these texts provide the framework through which we can deepen our understanding of God and who we are in relation to God. Another important reason for doing this is that it provides an opportunity for us to reclaim a deeper appreciation of the Scriptures for what they are and an improved understanding of what they are not. As we move through the weeks ahead we will explore and learn together why these ancient stories are worthy of our close attention in the world in which we live each day.

With that being said, I would like to pause for a moment for a little show and tell. I'd like us to consider the Bible itself as a way for us to begin at the beginning. So, let's pause for just a moment to look at some different kinds of Bibles:

- Children's Bible (June Sicilian's, mine & Milton's)
- Basic Bibles & "Presentation" Bibles
- Study Bible
- Lectern Bible (& family "coffee table" Bibles)

The most important fact to know about any Bible is that it will only take on meaning for you if you actually sit down and read it. While you can read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation straight through, I don't recommend it. I've done it, several times, which is why I can state with authority that it is not the most effective way to get a handle on the Bible. This is because, despite the fact that it looks like one book, it isn't. It is actually a collection of books, written and edited by many hands in several languages over thousands of years. It includes a variety of different kinds of literature ranging from lyrical prose and poetry to historical recollections to prophecy to liturgical and legal guidance. In other words, it's a mish-mash of a whole lot of stuff and it is difficult to wrap your head around if you just try to read it straight through. Best to focus on particular themes or threads of reflection as a guide for moving through the Bible that makes sense for your comprehension and appreciation of stories which look simple on the surface, but seldom are. That's a big part of the thinking behind this sermon series.

So, as we prepare to dive into today's story about Ezra and Nehemiah, I am going to invite you to do something out of the ordinary for this church, and many other mainline churches. I am going to ask you to pull out your pew Bible for just a minute while we do some very basic Bible 101 type stuff. *[Using pew Bible, guide folks through looking at the Table of Contents, then finding Nehemiah, then finding Chapter 8, v.1; then point out foot notes at the bottom of the page,]* Now that you're at

the passage for today's sermon, let's talk about this unique and amazing story.

We are starting with this story rather than a Genesis story because it is about the people quite literally rediscovering God's Word which had been lost to them for a long time. I believe that's what we are doing in a way during this sermon series which is why it seemed the logical starting point to me. In order to understand this story and its significance, first we need to place it into its own context. Knowing the circumstances that gave rise to the story and the people for whom it was written helps us to understand it more clearly, both on its own terms as well as what it means to us. This story most likely takes place around the year 444BCE or approximately 450 years before Jesus was born. Geographically, it takes place in the ruins of the once beautiful city of Jerusalem, just outside the ruins of Solomon's Temple. Jerusalem and the Temple were in ruins because they had been destroyed about 70 years previously when the Babylonians finally defeated the Israelites and destroyed the city and the Temple. Then, many of the ruling aristocracy and the learned people were carried into Babylon where they lived in captivity. Nehemiah's heritage is from this group of Babylonian captives. They built new lives while there, but the desire to return home to Jerusalem remained ever strong. When Nehemiah found himself in a position to ask a favor of King Artaxerxes of the Persians, the recent conquerors of

Babylon, he asked for permission to go back to Jerusalem and begin the process of rebuilding the city. Permission was granted and Nehemiah returns as part of the political authority of what was now a Persian colony. Ezra's story, as told in the 1 & 2 Chronicles as well as in the book of Ezra, is similar to Nehemiah's version of events but also has some differences. Ezra, who was a priest and scribe, was part of this rebuilding along with Nehemiah, representing the renewal of the religious authority of the Temple.

Important to know in reading this story is that during the captivity, both the captives in Babylon and the remnant left behind in Jerusalem, had seen their Temple and all their means for practicing their faith either destroyed, lost or looted. It was all gone and the building was literally a crumbling pile of ruins. Even the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and collapsed. By the time of this story, the rebuilding had been going on for a while. Rubble was being removed and, as the junk was cleared away, things were being rediscovered. One of the items found was one of the scrolls containing the Torah. This was a hugely important discovery because no one had read or heard anything from the Torah since the defeat of Jerusalem. The people had been without any tangible way of connecting with God for generations. So, the people had quite literally forgotten much of their own religion and religious practice.

This is the setting for today's story. The scroll has been recovered and, realizing the tremendous significance of this find, plans were made for a public reading of the scroll to the people who had never heard it before. A special platform was built for Ezra to stand on as he read from the scroll to be sure the people could see and hear him as he read. And then, arrangements were made for something quite extraordinary. Both lay people of deep faith as well as the remaining Levite priests were disbursed among the crowd so that as Ezra read, the people could be assisted to understand. Their questions could be answered immediately. Or, if their Hebrew was rusty, instantaneous translation into the native Aramaic could be made of the more important parts of the text. Amazing! Ezra and Nehemiah knew that the people had to be able to understand the sacred text or its reading would mean nothing to them.

Ezra began to read and the assistants helped the people to understand and soon the people were weeping because they were realizing just what they had lost when the scrolls disappeared. They were also rediscovering anew their faith and the tremendous love God had for them. No wonder they were weeping! A whole part of their lives and heritage they didn't even know about was being given back to them. They were literally rediscovering God and God's Word and its significance for their lives each day as people beloved of God. They became so distraught that Nehemiah

and Ezra needed to calm them down by reminding them this was not a day for grief but instead a day for celebrating. “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord.” They continued on saying one more thing, “do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength. That’s why Ezra and Nehemiah arranged for this reading of the Torah for the people. That’s why it was so important to them for the people to rediscover their faith in God, the religious tradition that formed the foundation of an entire people, as revealed in the sacred writings of the Torah. Do not be grieved for the joy of the Lord is your strength. Don’t be sad for all the things you don’t do, you can’t do, when you think about God and God’s place in your life, they are saying. Don’t dwell on what isn’t, no matter the reason. Instead, make room in your life, in your soul, in your heart for the joy of the Lord and you will have all the strength you need for whatever God places before you. The joy of the Lord is *your* strength. Yours personally! All you need do is open your heart and your mind to receive it.

One more point we need to consider as we begin this exploration of the richness we will find in the Scriptures of the Old Testament. We need always to remember these are indeed the *Hebrew* Scriptures. They were written by Hebrew priests and

scribes for the Hebrew people. The Old Testament is the sacred text of the Jewish religion and must always be encountered with that in mind. This may seem obvious but far too often Christians only want to encounter the Old Testament as a precursor for Jesus. In fact, some conservative Christian traditions think that the Old Testament exists *only* to set the stage for Jesus. This approach to the reading of these texts is harmful because it devalues Jewish people by appropriating their sacred texts to bolster another religion. This practice in relation to the Old Testament is called supercessionism. It matters that we understand this because supercessionism is at the root of all anti-Semitic beliefs. Also, let's not forget, Jesus was a Jew. That's not to say we can't see Jesus in some of those Old Testament texts. He quoted them himself and there is nothing wrong with our reading some of the prophetic texts of Judaism with the lens of our Christian faith. But they will always be Jewish texts first and that we can't forget.

So, our journey through the Old Testament begins! As we rediscover these ancient stories together, we are quite literally following in the footsteps of Nehemiah, Ezra and those ancient folks rebuilding Jerusalem more than two millennia ago. I'm excited about it and I hope you are too. Oh, the places we'll go! Buckle up! Amen.