

“The ears of all the people were attentive...”

Nehemiah 8:1-12

June 11, 2023

Rev. Jerry Duggins

The list of names: every liturgist's nightmare. Sometimes I say, “read them with confidence.” Sometimes I advise reading them quickly. Always, I say nobody else knows how they're supposed to be pronounced. I feel like I should say something about the names, but I almost never do. They may have been important to the first generation of readers. They would have been recognized as leaders in the community.

If there were only twelve instead of thirteen, I would say that they represented the twelve tribes of Israel, which is in fact what my sole commentary on this book suggests. He cites parallel versions of this story in apocryphal books which only list twelve names, and then he goes on to say that what we have in Nehemiah is a “corrupted text.” Scholars make comments like this all the time without a thought to their impact on our understanding of scripture as “inspired.” File that away while I back up and give you some background for today's story.

Today, we begin this summer's whirlwind tour of mostly small and lesser known books of the Bible. Nehemiah is the second part of a single work that began with Ezra. In the Christian tradition, they are separate books, but together they tell the story of Israel's return to their homeland after 70 years of captivity in Babylon. The return occurs in three stages with many years between each. The restoration of Jerusalem by which I mean the reconstruction of the temple and the rebuilding of the walls, happens over a period of 75 years. So from the destruction of Jerusalem to its restoration, we're looking at 150 years or so. Nehemiah tells the story of the rebuilding of the wall and culminates in this celebration where the people gather to hear the reading of the Torah.

Many attempts to rebuild the walls were made, but they were always thwarted by local authorities who had no desire to see Jerusalem restored to its former glory. The politics of the region were in quite a state of flux as various nations struggled to maintain or gain control of Judah. Persia is in control at this time, but they govern through political appointees rather than military occupation. Nehemiah is in Persia, serving the king, when our story opens. When he hears of the latest failure to rebuild the walls, he receives permission to go to Jerusalem and carries with him letters granting permission to work on the walls. He's essentially appointed governor, and through careful management succeeds in his task. Ezra is a priest who has been working on restoring the institutions of their faith.

What we see in this story is the beginning of a new faith, rooted in the book, in sacred scripture. This is the second mention of a book in the Hebrew Scriptures that was to have great influence in the lives of the people. The first occurs in Kings and leads to the reforms of Josiah, based, most scholars think, on the book of Deuteronomy. Most believe that

Ezra reads from the Pentateuch or Torah. Apart from these two instances, knowledge about God, comes through oral traditions, the words of prophets, or the wisdom of Judges.

This is where Judaism, as we know it today, begins. Long after the days of the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; long after the days the kings: Saul, David, and Solomon. The Jews, really for the first time, are a people of the book, a book that only takes shape in the context of the captivity in Babylon.

We, too, are a people of the book; and like Judaism, Christianity takes about 150 years to settle into its sacred scripture. On this day when we install leaders to the session, it seems appropriate to remember the importance of the book. Ezra gathered the leaders not just to stand with him in the reading, but also to emphasize the importance of the book for their leadership.

There are two things from this story that continue to be important for us today. The first from verse three reads: “the ears of all the people were attentive to the book.” Our intention statement reminds us that “we live a whole life, in response to God, attentively...” We try to pay attention at Westminster... to what’s happening in the world, to the celebrations and concerns of our faith community, to the welcome and inclusion of others in our work, worship, and activities, to the welfare of the earth, and to the word that God speaks to us today through a responsible reading of the scriptures, and the wisdom given to the faith community through our traditions and use of reason.

Failure to be attentive to scripture can lead to a careless and often abusive use of our sacred texts. Scripture has been used to justify slavery, to condemn homosexuality, to marginalize women, to do violence to indigenous peoples. People who read scripture to advance their own interests while judging others would do better to stop reading.

To be attentive to scripture is to acknowledge the human hand that wrote it, to recognize the context in which it is written, and to accept that the message may be different for our context. Scripture is not a blank slate that fits every time and place. Verse eight tells us that they “read from the book... with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” This is the second thing: the object of reading scripture is not blind acceptance, but understanding.

If you don’t understand something in the Bible, ask about it, read a commentary, keep struggling with it; but don’t imagine that you’ve heard a word from the Lord. Don’t begin a sentence with “the Bible says.” Better to skip over it than presume knowledge without understanding.

To be attentive to scripture is to attend to the writer, to the world in which the writer lives, to the original reader, to longings expressed, the pain felt, the life experienced. To be attentive to scripture is to recognize your own bias, to tend to your own pain, to acknowledge your own longing. To be attentive to scripture is to be aware of others: their hopes and disappointment, their gifts and needs, their loves and fears. To be attentive to

scripture is to live in the world, to discern between blessing and curse, between justice and injustice, between pain and pleasure.

Scripture is not the words on a page, but the intersection of times, places, peoples, and the understandings that arise as we attend to all the parts. To be a people of the book is to believe that God speaks to us in the places where lives come together, where understanding disperses confusion, where good overcomes evil, and love conquers hate.

When I read the Bible, it is not enough for me to understand the meaning of the words. I want to make connections with the faith community that produced these words. And I want to bring with me to the text not just myself but the community that nurtures me and the world in which I live. I want a conversation, not a lesson or directive. It's not scripture until these things come together. And they don't come together, unless we're paying attention.

This means for those being installed today (and all of us really) that compassion matters more than authority, that love is more important than being right, and that the more you listen, the better you'll fulfill your responsibilities. Listening doesn't absolve us from leading. It doesn't mean we just do what people want. Listening leads to understanding. Our decisions and actions flow not just from what we heard, but from what we understand. We are a people of the book, a people searching for a word from God... attentively. Amen.