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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
1/27/2013, The Third Sunday after Epiphany
Nehemiah 8:1-10, Psalm 19, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a, Luke 4:14-21
Ministers for Mediocre Times

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from our First Lesson, from Nehemiah 8. It is a passage that speaks of the two heroes of this sermon, Nehemiah and Ezra:

⁹And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. (Nehemiah 8:9, RSV)

Let me begin with some history, to put things in context. First off, the location of the two books Ezra and Nehemiah in the Bible is a little bit confusing. These two books are in the first half of the Old Testament, before we get to the Psalms or the prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah. But that does not mean that Ezra and Nehemiah are about ancient things. No, the stories they tell are what are called "post-exilic." That is, Ezra and Nehemiah are about events that took place in the mid-400s B.C. Those days come long after King David, long after the fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria, long after the labors of Isaiah and Jeremiah, long after the fall of Judah to the Babylonian Empire, even fairly long after defeat of the Babylonian Empire by the Persian Empire. And when I say that these stories are "post-exilic," I am not making some fancy scholarly claim about the likely time of the *authors* of these books, but a more simple point: the Biblical text itself is plainly about things that took place *after* the Babylonian Captivity of the Jews. The Biblical text itself speaks of the rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 6:15, finished in 515 B.C.), of the rebuilding of the walls and the population of Jerusalem, and of Persian rulers like Artaxerxes (465-424 B.C.).

But in placing Ezra and Nehemiah *before* the Psalms, the Bible is not confused about the sequence of history. It is rather a literary matter. Ezra and Nehemiah are part of what are called the "historical books of the Bible." They start with Joshua; Ezra and Nehemiah are near the end of that collection. Then we have the Wisdom Books, like Job, the Psalms, and Proverbs, and then the Prophets. So, though the prophet Jeremiah, for example, lived before Ezra and Nehemiah, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah come much earlier in the Bible than Jeremiah. No problem. It is simply the liturgy structure of the Bible.

The upshot of this is that today's First Lesson is about a fairly modern time in the long history of Israel. Israel has much history behind her by the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Israel is already getting a bit long-in-the-tooth.

DESPONDENT

More importantly, Israel has become despondent. She has lived a long, long time, and life has not gotten better for her. In fact, economic and political life has been low and the spiritual life of Israel has been quite downhearted for a long time now.

But the thing about Ezra and Nehemiah is that they are undismayed. They are spirited people in a depressed age.

Maybe we could use them nowadays. I think we could. I hope that this year of our Lord 2013 will be better than last year, because last year was pretty stunning to many of us. There was madness and murder in innocent places: in schools and shopping malls and movie theatres. About a week ago, for example, a fifteen-year-old boy in New Mexico shot his mother, his younger brother, two younger sisters, and his father, then spent much of the next day hanging out with his twelve-year-old girlfriend contemplating more murder.¹

Such stories appall us. Not only do we sorrow for those who are lost and for those who grieve for them, but also such stories worry us about the spirit of our age. In his novels, Dostoevsky explored again and again a dreadful idea: that if God is dead, then all things become possible, all things become lawful, that if God is dead then we ourselves become God and act without traditional moral constraints. There was something about this past year that made me wonder, is atheism catching up with us? Are we in for terrible times ahead?

If so, Ezra and Nehemiah are for us. They lived in miserable times, but did the best they could to turn things around. Let me tell you about these two good men of God.

EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

At the start of the story, Ezra and Nehemiah are not in Jerusalem at all, but rather in the court of the King of Persia—a king named Artaxerxes. Persia is modern-day Iran. So, that's where our heroes are at the start of the story. They are officials in the Persian court. The scribe Ezra is a representative of Jewish affairs at the Persian court.² Nehemiah is an officer in the court of Artaxerxes.³

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2013/01/23/justice/new-mexico-shooting/index.html>

² *The New Jerusalem Bible*, "Introduction to The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah" (Doubleday: New York, 1985), page 508.

³ *The Lectionary Commentary: The First Lessons*. Page 253.

Let's step back a century earlier. In 538 B.C. the Persian King Cyrus issued his edict permitting the Jews who had been captives in Babylon to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the Temple. It should have been the start of happy days. But instead, it was the start of a century of faint-hearted labors, poverty, and disappointment. The returning Jews did manage to rebuild the Temple. It took twenty-two years to do so. They did rebuild the Temple, then, but this Second Temple did not measure up to the great Temple built by King Solomon centuries before. And I guess that is possible. I guess it is possible that one generation cannot quite build things as splendid as an earlier generation. I mean, if we had to rebuild our church here, Immanuel Lutheran Church, I wonder whether we could realistically accomplish what the generation of poor German immigrants accomplished when they built this building back in 1886.

Now, let's move ahead to Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra the scribe led a second wave of Jews back to Jerusalem. About the same time, Nehemiah petitioned Artaxerxes for permission to return to Jerusalem too to help rebuild the city. News had reached him about how devastated Jerusalem was even more than a century after its defeat (587 B.C.). Nehemiah's request was granted and he was appointed governor of the province.

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he finds the rebuilt Temple, but the city is still pretty much a ruin. In the quaint words of the King James Version, he found a depopulated city:

Now the city was large and great: but the people were few therein, and the houses were not builded. (Nehemiah 7:4, KJV)

Ezra and Nehemiah were the twin restorers of Jerusalem. They were like pastor and Board of Trustees here at Immanuel. Ezra was called to a spiritual ministry among the people; Nehemiah to a temporal one. Nehemiah set right to work rebuilding the walls of the town. The completion of that task is the occasion for today's First Lesson.

READING THE TORAH

In our Reading, all the people of Jerusalem gather around Ezra and he reads the Torah to them. It takes a good while to do all that reading, plus the reading need to be interpreted and explained. These were the days of transition of languages. Ezra's scriptures were written in Hebrew, but the people were starting to speak Aramaic. Ezra had a good number of helpers for the job of teaching the Torah to the people.

This, then, was the way forward as far as Ezra and Nehemiah were concerned: What the downhearted people of Israel need to do was to return to the stories and the ways of the Lord.

The prophets before Ezra and Nehemiah had spoken of good times and of the coming Messiah. For their part Ezra and Nehemiah appeal to the people to return to the Word of the Lord and to walk again in his ways, to present themselves as people who actually believed that the good will of the Lord was going to prevail and that they meant to get themselves ready for it.

AND THE PEOPLE WEPT

Now, here is a moving note in our text. It says that when the people heard the Law of the Lord, they wept:

⁸And they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. (Nehemiah 8:8-9, RSV)

They wept. Why do you suppose they wept? Perhaps it was because they sensed the gap between life as the holy law of God describes it and as they had actually lived their lives. They were Israelites. They should have had the world at their feet. I do not mean the wealth or the power of the world at their feet—such things sort themselves out as best they can, and sometimes they indeed favor the godly. But more than wealth or power or glory, they should have had fullness of life at their feet. It was within reach for them, as it is for us too.

We read of such fullness of life in today's Psalm 19. Piety does not impoverish, but makes life richer. Here the Psalmist speak of these things:

⁷ The law of the Lord is perfect and re- | vives the soul;*
the testimony of the Lord is sure and gives wisdom | to the innocent.

⁸ The statutes of the Lord are just and re- | joice the heart;*
the commandment of the Lord is clear and gives light | to the eyes.

¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold, more than | much fine gold,*
sweeter far than honey, than honey | in the comb. (Psalm 19:7-8,
10, LBW)

SAILING THROUGH THIS LIFE

Here we are, you and I: we go sailing through this life as best we can. But like Odysseus on the sea, we are subject to the call of the Sirens who would lure us to shipwreck. Those Sirens: they call out to us to come and have a real good time.

But, interestingly, so does the Lord. It is as our Psalm says:

⁷ The law of the Lord is perfect and re- | vives the soul;*

And it would be good to be revived.

I am not sure that we can do any better in our own generation than did Nehemiah, Ezra, and the people. Ezra preached, the people wept, and Ezra comforted them and encouraged them in the way of the Lord.

As for you and me, we know who the long-awaited Messiah is: he is our own Lord Jesus Christ. The saints in this world have followed in his path and in his spirit and have found it to be a good path. Listen for example, to the testimony of St. Seraphim of Sarov, a nineteenth century Russian saint who labored to bring the monastic virtues into the lives of laypeople too. He said this:

You cannot be too gentle, too kind. Shun even to appear harsh in your treatment of each other. Joy, radiant joy, streams from the face of one who gives and kindles joy in the heart of one who receives. (St. Seraphim of Sarov⁴)

My friend Sharon Ross, who is an Eastern Orthodox Christian tells me that St. Seraphim's kindness was legendary. So much so, in fact, that he was able to calm wild animals - bears, wolves and the like.

Ahh, to be able to calm the wildness and the temper in others and in ourselves! That is what the holy Law of God bids us to.

Better times are coming, yes, because Jesus is coming again. But even now, short of the coming Kingdom, life can be better for us, even sweeter than honey in the honey comb, if we can trust the testimony of the Psalmist. It can be better now through a renewed walk with Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

⁴ Saint Seraphim of Sarov (Russian: Серафим Саровский) (1754 (or 1759) – 1833), born Prokhor Moshnin (Прохор Мошнин), is one of the most renowned Russian monks and mystics in the Orthodox Church. He is generally considered the greatest of the 19th century startsy (elders) and, arguably, the first. He is remembered for extending the monastic teachings of contemplation, theoria and self-denial to the layperson, and taught that the purpose of the Christian life was to acquire the Holy Spirit. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seraphim_of_Sarov