

What is this place?

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Nehemiah 8:1-10

Luke 4:14-21

The Lord be with you.

Today is a day of stories: Nehemiah's story, Jesus' story, our story. We gather and read the scripture from Nehemiah, which is the story of a group gathered to read the scripture. And we gather to listen to the scripture from Luke in which the people gather to listen to the scripture from Isaiah.

You have seen those pictures where someone is holding a picture of themselves, holding a picture of themselves, holding a picture of themselves and it goes on and on? Today, here in this place, we find our own story in that long chain of stories.

Here, in this place, we read about the return of the people of Israel to their God, to the temple they are rebuilding in Jerusalem. We hear Jesus in the synagogue as he reads from Isaiah and receives his own calling in that moment. As these stories are woven together we can feel ourselves become part of the text.

This is part of the beauty of this old, old text; it is living and inviting. Across thousands of years and multiple cultures, even though it was written for a different religion than we now claim, this text is our scripture, our holy word. It is our story.

Some of you may remember how a year ago we wondered where we would worship during construction. Where would the community land for a few months? Thankfully our friends at the Church of the Brethren welcomed us in. Yet when we left this building on March 18, 2012, processing down East West Highway, leaving Hyattsville and crossing into University Park, we heard ourselves say, "Is this like exile?"

Exile is part of the ancient story.

There were times this past year -though it was a choice, though it was not violent or cold or miserable, we slipped into the language of exile. The familiar felt far way, and we wanted to go back even as we hoped for something new. We began counting the weeks and days until we could return. Certainly walking from University Park back to Hyattsville last week felt like coming home.

And let's not forget that not everyone knew what they were longing for, not everyone knew what we had left. When we packed up our belongings in the storage pod, we did not pack away our commitment to hospitality, to keep it safe for our return. We carried our commitment to hospitality with us to an unfamiliar place. What a surprise and delight to find that the congregation grew and multiplied while we were in a strange land. As we are faithful, we experience God's faithfulness.

In the Hebrew Bible, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of the people as they return to Jerusalem after the time of exile. They begin to rebuild the temple. It is a project that happens in fits and starts, depending on who is in power in Babylon. The temple is never again rebuilt as beautifully as the temple that Solomon built, but it is their place of worship once again.

Ezra is sent to the people to fortify their faith, to remind them of who they are. In exile, the Israelites have married the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites and others living in that land. After so many generations they have adapted to the customs of the people among whom they live. They have forgotten their uniqueness as YHWH's people.

Ezra comes to call them back to their identity in YHWH. In what sounds cruel to our ears, Ezra resorts to drastic measures; he insists that to reclaim their identity the

Israelite men must leave their foreign wives and foreign born children when they return to Jerusalem.

The text today gives us Ezra in Jerusalem. Despite the cruel instructions he had given, the people ask Ezra to read to them from the Holy Scripture. On this day, as the people gather at the Water Gate in a public place, they are all there. In the temple, the men and women are separate, but in this public place *all who can understand, women and men*, are welcome and listening.

The people stand for the reading; they raise their hands saying “Amen, Amen.” They bow their heads to the ground in worship and they weep as they hear Ezra read and interpret the holy law — out loud, outside — for six hours.

In Luke, the scripture reading lasts only a few minutes. Jesus has just returned from his 40 day sojourn in the wilderness and goes home to Nazareth. On the Sabbath he goes to the local synagogue, where he stands to read from the scroll of Isaiah.

His baptism was not that long ago. He had that dramatic experience of the Holy Spirit descending upon him, like a dove. So when he reads this text: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me*, it resonates strongly within him. Jesus reads Isaiah’s words and boldly proclaims that he will fulfill this ancient prophecy. *God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

Perhaps too, he hears the joyful liberation song his mother, Mary, sang when she found out she was pregnant with him.

In Nehemiah, the people return after generations in exile to hear the law. In Luke, Jesus returns after 40 days in the wilderness to read from the prophet. Today after our

return, we hear Luke and Isaiah and Nehemiah and Ezra and the Hyattsville story. We listen to the stories of others listening to stories and we hear our own story. And as we tell our story, we too proclaim that God has been faithful and at work among us.

While our actual time away was 44 weeks, it took much longer, as David told the children, for us to get to the place where we were ready to take action. Like the exodus story, we wandered in the desert, taking this path and then that road until we found our way toward our goal. Our mission statement, passed by the congregation January 21, 1990, was a deliberate step toward understanding who we are and what our needs are - 23 years ago.

We wondered and wandered together for years. What do we need in this place? Sunday School classrooms? A new sanctuary? Maybe a new kitchen? Perhaps accessibility?

New people joined, others moved away. Babies were born, a few people passed on. Some of the group found that their faith led them to follow Christ with other congregations.

Like the story of the children of Israel that wandered in the desert for 40 years, some of those who inspired us did not make it to this day. How many Moses have we had among us?

I think of Sally White, who was a member and leader here for more than 30 years until her death in 2006. She called together the first building committee in the late 1980s. As we wrote our mission statement, she noted that it seemed rather serious and somber. Sally was a joyful woman who knew how to throw a beautiful dinner party. She

called us to celebration when she said, “Let’s celebrate our diversity of gifts and talents, not just say that we use them.”

I remember Beth Foster, who was among us less than 5 years. Her yearnings called us together in feminist Bible study, in worship arts, in prayer. When her mobility was limited due to cancer, we knew that the imagined the elevator was for her too. We jokingly said we would name the eventual lift “the Beth-el.” Beth died surrounded by members of her congregational family in January 2008.

How could we have known that Charlie — Charlie who could not speak in words but sang and laughed and loved opera and played his harmonica — how could we know that he would be a Moses? In his wheelchair, Charlie inspired and helped us begin to imagine a building, a new land where all could enter.

Like Moses, these are some of the people that led and lived among us, but did not make it to this day, to this land that we have dreamed of and hoped for together for so many years. Today we remember their faithfulness, the way God worked through them to bring us together to this place.

Ezra reads the scripture and the Levites interpret it so passionately that those gathered hear with new ears. They weep when they hear the law; perhaps they realize what they have been missing all those years. But Ezra has no time for weeping in sorrow for what might have been, for missed opportunities and guilty laments. He says it is time to eat and drink and celebrate; time to share with those who have nothing for the joy of God is their strength. It is not the fear of the Lord, it is not the wrath of God, it is the *Joy of the Lord* that strengthens them. That joy is contagious and they go out to share and spread the joy.

Jesus reads in Luke a similar message of joy: those who struggle will be freed, those who cannot see will have new sight. The jubilee year is coming, the year when all will have enough. Jesus claims this as his calling. We who follow Jesus are invited into this joy as well — to find ways to bring joy and freedom, to proclaim God's jubilee.

What is this place where we are meeting? This is the place where our story meets God's story, where God's story becomes our story. Stories and burdens, joy and beauty and liberation are not only possible they are present. This is the place where our stories become bread and wine for each other.

Thanks be to God for the gift of stories and life together — and a place for all to worship.