

1.23.22 atonement westfield, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a, Luke 4:14-21, Psalm 19

A few days ago I attended a healing service at St. Peter's in Springfield. After the service concluded, we lingered a little more in small chat and someone spoke about their reflections from the last bible study meetup. Fr. Mike was unable to join them due to his internet service failing, but they still continued on and discussed the book of revelations, pointing out the many revelation-like time periods throughout history. Fr. Mike agreed and chimed in to add

“yes indeed, In fact a good question to reflect on pertaining to the book of revelations is how do we process that now in the pandemic? “If you were able to go back in time and warn the church about the pandemic, what would you tell us?”

This question is quite deep and would require a well thought out, practical answer for the multiple problems to be solved. We can talk about pandemic policies, systematic injustice, spread of misinformation, corrupt governments, so on and so forth.

For a never-ending question full of never-ending answers, I won't dive into it further with you today. I do want to acknowledge, however, in this season of Epiphany, regardless of how ridiculous or uncertain our present and future may seem, that it is even more important we continue to recognize who and what we stand for as Christians.

Because if we lose sight of what our deepest intentions are as beloveds of Christ, then we lose our ability to focus on the greater meaning of life, which is to walk with God.

And no matter how many revelations we go through, no matter how many pains and tribulations we come across, if we truly follow Christ in our hearts and in our actions then we already possess the answer to what is being revealed to us wherever we are in life.

In studying the Old Testament story for this Sunday, I was amazed at its powerful testimony of what can happen to a community when they identify their greatest meaning and use it to work together to overcome their revelation.

The book of Nehemiah is a collection of Nehemiah's writings, who was a high official of the Persian Capital living in 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Nehemiah records his efforts into reclaiming his Jewish community and helping them restore themselves spiritually and physically in Jerusalem after their exile.

Overall, this process took him over 12 years to complete, but nonetheless Nehemiah knew he had a mission and a calling to help his people and throughout it all he prayed fiercely to God to help them through it all as God has promised them in the past.

The book doesn't give much about Nehemiah's background but it seemed he was very well respected because as soon as he found out that the walls of Jerusalem were destroyed, his King instantly approved and supported Nehemiah's request of leave to return.

By that time, this city was already destroyed twice, besieged 23 times, attacked 52 times, and captured and recaptured 44 times. The Jewish people were exiled, enslaved, and displaced throughout the region. They desperately needed hope from God and Nehemiah was truly God sent.

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he first inspected the wall, then soon after gathered the people and told them it was time to rebuild. The entire third chapter of Nehemiah is of him giving credit to, I assume, most of the individuals who helped with the repairs. Even the high priest has credit for fixing the gate and consecrating doors with the other priests.

The hardest part turned out not being the physical rebuilding itself, but instead it was the community having to face mockery and potential attacks from their enemies, and Nehemiah himself having to deal with the leadership drama of rejection, opposition and accusations from noblemen, adversaries and even from the Jewish people.

Nehemiah also had to restore the balance between them and the local officials. The people were suffering from the heavy burdens of unfair taxes, high debt and abuse of their possessions being taken from them to cover the needs of the officials. Nehemiah put an end to the unjust practices in calling out their leaders, removing the interest, giving back the people's possessions and adding his own resources to support them. Nehemiah swore to God and to the Jewish people that they would not go back to being slaves and exiles mistreated by everyone around them. He even went as far as summoning priests to place their leaders under oath to promise to never do such a thing again.

Nehemiah stayed true to his Jewish identity. He remembered his God through worship and took action when he could do so for the people of God. He persisted in praying and keeping Jewish traditions like fasting, celebrating Passover, and having celebrations throughout the restoration. Nehemiah did not want his people to be more depressed and overwhelmed with this ginormous task and he made sure to use all his power and authority to uplift them in a common cause through their heritage.

Because of their overall commitment and dedication to God in everything they did, Jerusalem regained itself. The enemies took notice of the success they were having and backed down, acknowledging that God was with them.

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Our old-testament reading is from chapter 8 of Nehemiah, narrating the great gathering sometime after the wall completion and Nehemiah becoming their Governor and resettling them. The Jewish people came together in worship and listened to the book of law from the Priest Ezra. Following the reading was interpretation so people could understand it. Afterwards, Nehemiah ordered them to not weep. He told them to celebrate and to not grieve for “the joy of the lord is your strength”.

Isn't that incredible? Just think for a moment, them sitting there, bowing down, repenting of their sins and possibly reflecting on all the horrors they lived through for years and years, pondering their own revelation while trying to navigate a world that rejects and abuses them over and over again. They finally have some relief through Nehemiah, a person of power, status and honor who could have easily stayed away from such a broken city, who went above and beyond to serve and stay present with them throughout the restoration, giving them ample guidance and support, and tells them during worship to grieve no more but rejoice in the Lord. Nehemiah was truly God sent.

Doesn't that seem familiar to you?

To know of someone appointed to take our pains away, to guide us into renewal and transformation. someone who is willing to be present with us in all our walks and take down barriers that only they can to restore us.

It's so great to see the presence of Jesus throughout the Old Testament, I've had many epiphany moments myself in going ah ha! There's one!

Nehemiah's courage to respond to God's calling is like that of Jesus in our Gospel message of Luke, where Jesus declares the start of his ministry and reads from Isaiah chapter 6 of the Spirit being upon him to bring good news to the poor, release the captives, to let the oppressed go free. Both of them knew the risk they were taking yet they chose, with all their heart and soul, to follow God.

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Thank Goodness you are here today, whether with me in person or online. Isn't it wonderful that we are all called to do similar, amazing acts of love, miracles of our gifts alive in the presence of others. What a joy we can bring to our neighbors, to our strangers, to our loved ones, when we can work through our revelations and not let our revelations work us. What a joy.

Now since hearing about the story of Nehemiah and his impact in restoring Jerusalem,

I want you all to answer that original question about the pandemic, but here's what I'm going to do, I'll answer it first with a question so that you can reflect on this too and interpret how God is calling you to respond.

So the original question was:

“If you were able to go back in time and warn the church about the pandemic, what would you tell us?”

And my answer is:

In keeping our traditions alive through a Christina community and beyond to our neighbors, how does that help us perceive and thrive in life especially in times of revelation? How can you take better initiative to follow Jesus in your walk today?

When we call ourselves Christians, followers of Christ .... are we truly instruments of compassion, hope, mercy, and justice? Are we bearing fruits of the spirit?

Remember, we cannot stop the revelation of pain and suffering from happening in this world. We do not possess that power.

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What we can do is to provide the remedies of wisdom, restoration, healing, hope, courage, and love that God supplies to us every day through our calling and our gifts. Through God we can outnumber the odds like Nehemiah in Jerusalem if we work together through our common cause.

Rejoice, turn to God today, trust in him with your heart and soul, remember who you are called to be. Amen.