

## Lost in Translation

### **Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10**

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And 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. Then he said to them, "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; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Do any of you watch the TV show *Lost*? When it first came on, I watched a few episodes. I kind of liked it, but then I missed it for a few weeks. And *Lost* is one of those shows that you have to see every week, or you won't know what's going on. So I just stopped watching. My younger sister, however, loves this show. So when I went on maternity leave, she made it her mission to get me to join in her addiction. She dropped off the first season on DVD. Since the first week of my leave was spent waiting for Kenna to make her appearance, I watched several episodes. And I admit, I'm as addicted as my sister.

The general plot is outlined in the first few minutes of the first episode: a plane crashes on a tropical island, and the survivors band together to make a new life. But this is not *Gilligan's Island*. It's much more dramatic, because it turns out this is a rather mysterious island. "Other" people live here. Unexplainable things happen. *Lost* is a smart drama with good storytelling.

Our Scripture reading this morning isn't a story about people getting lost on an island. Instead, it's a story about a story. A story that was lost. And when the story got lost, the people got lost. But I'm getting ahead of myself. First we need a history lesson. The Babylonians conquered the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, sending many of the people into exile. About 50

years later, the Persian Empire conquered Babylon. The Persians had a different strategy for keeping the peace, so they issued a decree to send the Jews home to rebuild their temple. See, the Persians felt that the best way to keep everyone happy was to let them keep their own religious traditions. It took about 25 years, but the temple was rebuilt. However, it would never again be as great as the first temple. People were not returning to Jerusalem to live. So nearly 60 years later, the Persian king Artaxerxes sent the priest Ezra to Jerusalem to bring Jews back to Jerusalem to live. He also sent Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of the city. It may have taken 25 years to restore the temple, but Nehemiah was motivated, and he rebuilt the city walls in only 52 days!

With security for the city in place, Jerusalem was starting to feel like a real city again. It no longer lay in ruins. People were willing to consider moving back. And so it seemed like it was time to do more than restore the buildings. It was time to restore the identity and faith of the Jewish people. So that's what's going on in our story this morning. Ezra gathers the people together and reads aloud from the Scriptures.

It's important to note who was present for this time of worship. First, we read that men, women, and "those who could understand" (meaning children who were old enough to participate) were there. In a patriarchal culture, if the author goes out of his way to mention that women and children were part of the crowd, that's significant. Nehemiah is telling us that this was so important, everyone was there. In fact, the location for this reading was one of the few places that even those who were ritually unclean were welcome to be present. Moreover, we also read that Ezra was not alone in reading the text. The verses we left out this morning were lists of the lay people who were helping Ezra with the reading. So not only did the crowd include everyone, but the worship leaders were both clergy and non-clergy.

Once Ezra starts leading this worship service, he goes on at length. They read from the Scriptures for about six hours. That may sound like an awful long time to us, but Nehemiah tells us that the people were attentive. Perhaps it helped that while they were listening, a group of priests were walking among the crowd, interpreting what was being read. Scholars disagree on what kind of interpreting was going on. It's possible they were literally translating the text, as the people had been in exile so long, many may not have known Hebrew anymore. On the other hand, perhaps they were offering something more like a sermon, putting the Scriptures into context and helping them to make sense.

After this extended worship service, the people respond with weeping and mourning. It has been so long since the people have been able to claim their identity, they have forgotten who they are. They mourn over the sins they have committed. They have been living lives displeasing to God because they didn't know the law.

And then a curious thing happens. Nehemiah tells them to stop weeping and mourning. Instead, he says, this is a holy day meant for joy. The people should be celebrating that the temple, and the law, and Jewish identity have been restored. Nehemiah says, "the joy of the Lord is your strength." Verse 12 reads, "And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them."

These people are pretty excited about the law. Books of the Bible that we find dry, complicated, and stifling. I'm pretty sure that if I planned a six-hour worship service, none of you would come. Okay, I might be able to guilt a few of you into showing up for part of the time. But if you knew the whole thing was going to be me reading the first five books of the Bible, you'd all try to be here for the reading of the Creation Story and Noah's Ark. By the time we got

to the rules for ritual sacrifice, you'd be running for the doors. And I don't blame you – I'd probably be trying to sneak out myself!

So what has happened? Why do we have the opposite reaction to this experience that people had in Nehemiah's day? If we're honest, most of us aren't too enthusiastic about the part of the Scriptures we call "the law." It's not that we're reckless, lawless people. It's just that we know about the freedom that comes with the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ. We don't want to go back to a system of laws and ritual sacrifice.

But the law serves three important purposes that we should not forget. First, the law exposes sin in the world. The law defines for us what God's expectations are. The second purpose of the law is closely related. It serves as a deterrent to sin. Because most people in the world really are good at heart. We want to do the right thing. But we need to know what that right thing is. The law spells that out for us.

If these were the only reasons for the law, we wouldn't be happy. Because these are sort of negative purposes. Seen in this light, the law only serves to illustrate that we are sinful people, living in a broken world, disconnected from God. We prefer our relationship with Christ, because that makes an attempt to fix what's wrong. But there's a third purpose for the law.

John Calvin, the great reformer and founder of the movement that became the Presbyterian church, said that the law is our tutor, and the "best instrument for [believers] to learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will." In other words, the law doesn't have to condemn us in our failings; it becomes a gift, a source of help in understanding the will of God. If I were to try to summarize all the laws given in the Old Testament, I would say that God's will for us is to love God and to love one another.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus tells the people that the greatest commandment is to love God. And a second, similar, commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. So you see, Jesus didn't come to do away with the law. We are not supposed to erase the Old Testament or ignore what it teaches us. But we do look at it in a different light. Because Jesus also said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." And Jesus fulfilled the law by loving God and all people.

At the end of the movie *E.T., the Extraterrestrial*, E.T. leaves Gertie with one rule to follow. "Be good." Which sounds great in the moment of the movie. But when you stop to think about it, that's really deceptively simple. What does it mean to be good? And what does it really mean to love God and my neighbor? Sometimes it helps to have some specific examples. And that's how we can find the law useful for us even today. We don't have to take it literally, but we can take it seriously. It can help us to understand God's will, even though we know that the law alone is not enough to save us. For that, we continue to rely on our relationship with Jesus Christ, who shows us mercy and grace that go beyond what the law can provide. Amen and amen.