

## Israel's Water Gate Incident

<sup>NRS</sup> Neh 8:1 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. <sup>8</sup> So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

Don't just sit there, do something! Have you ever said this when you were upset and wanted someone to get off their tail and help you out? Don't just sit there, do something!

I'm guessing there were some folks in Israel who were thinking this when the book of Nehemiah was written. The Israelites had just come back from exile, and Jerusalem was absolutely wrecked. This is the backdrop, of our text today.

It's not a particularly easy one to read or listen to is it? What about those names? Aren't they great? Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah... This is one of those texts I normally give to someone else to read. Someone who has displeased us in some way. David Norse comes to mind.

Really, Nehemiah is not one of your better known books of the Bible. It's not up there with your Matthews and your Genesises. It's more down there with your Ezras and your Judes. I checked my records- I've never actually preached on it and I'm not I've ever heard anyone preach on it before. And it's a shame really, because it's a great book. I said it was written after the exile, and this is a time in Israel's life most of us don't know a whole lot about. You know most of the Hebrew bible is like a way back machine, telling us about Abraham and Moses and then the kings. And then in the prophets we hear about the exile- when the people were carted off to Babylon. And then for most of us that's about it. For most of us the story stops and then we pick it up with Jesus in the first century. But you know from a drama perspective, this is a real waste, isn't it? I mean who likes to watch characters that are always doing great? Who in their heart really pulls for the Yankees? No, there's something about us that likes the underdog. And let me tell you, Israel in the days just after exile- here they're not only the Cleveland Indians, they're the bad news bears.

But at least they made it back, back home, and they're cleaning up. The entire first half of the book describes them fixing up Jerusalem again. Plugging the neon lights back in and all that. Yeah, their main work is building up the wall around Jerusalem again and fixing up the city gates, the city doors.

Now up until this point in this sermon series on doors, we've really only been talking about doors in a personal way- talking about the doors to our homes, say. But these are not the only kinds of doors in the Bible- in fact that they may not even be the most important doors. Some of the most important doors in the Bible are the city doors, the gates, they're called. In Israel the gates were where everything happened. The gates

were the equivalent of the agora in a Greek town- the place where everybody showed up. The markets were there, the courts were, the gates were where the Prophets spoke to the people. Ancient Israel may not have been a democracy, but if you showed up at the gates on any given day, you might not have been able to guess that.

And this is completely the case in our text for today. Now I know text sounds like a snoozer, definitely a text if you were reading on your own that you'd just skim over, but it's really an amazing scene. See in the text for today we see Israel worship for the first time since they came back from exile and unpacked their bags in Jerusalem. We see Israel worship for the first time together in Jerusalem without the temple. You know when the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, most folks just thought that was game over for the faith. The temple was supposed to be where God dwelled, and when that was gone, maybe that meant God had left the building, too. So there's this big question hovering over everything when they come back. What they do? Would they worship again? What would this look like?

And what we get is amazing. We find ourselves in front of the Water gate, the place where the women pass by every day to go to the wells to draw water. And Ezra, the guy who led the Israelites back through the desert from Babylon back home, they call Ezra to bring the Torah and to read it to them. And it's the most amazing scene- it's worship that's completely different from anything we've seen before in the Bible.

In the temple everything is divided into courts. Non Jews could only go so far- then they had to stop. Then Jewish women could go a little farther, and then they had to stop. And then Jewish men could go a little bit farther and then they had to stop. Finally, there was the inner court where only the priests could go, and then, even more sacred

than that stood the Holy of Holies where only the High Priest could go- and he only went in once a year on Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. I always love the stories the rabbis tell of how they would tie a rope to the high priest's leg when he went in in case things went badly. It was like they were all watching Raiders of the Lost Ark too many times. So in the temple, every body is divided up by race and gender.

But what's it like when they gather together at the Water Gate? Oh, it's completely different. Nehemiah writes: "All gathered in front of the gate- both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. The writer of Nehemiah is so surprised at this he writes it down twice, like he's trying to tell us, "No, really, I know it sounds strange, but that's what happened." Yeah, at the Water Gate no one is excluded, no one is told they aren't welcome- everyone stands together.

And the content of worship is entirely different, too, isn't it? In the temple worship took the form of sacrifice. You'd go in, buy an animal for a priest to sacrifice, and that would be it. You probably wouldn't talk to the priest, and you probably wouldn't even see the sacrifice carried out. I have no idea why this was supposed to be helpful for someone. I'm positive the animals felt that way.

What's worship like at the Water Gate? It's strikingly different. For one thing there is no sacrifice. Not unless you count the knees of everyone who was standing for three hours while Ezra read the text. Yeah, there's no sacrifice. In place of that Ezra reads from the Torah. Can you imagine what this would be like for people who were used to religion being going to a priest you didn't know, who would sacrifice an animal you never saw? Here there's someone reading. And they're reading to you. And more than that, the priests are there, but they're doing something totally different. The Levites

were the priests in Israel. And the Levites are here, but they've got a new job. What are they doing? They are going out into the crowd while in between as Ezra is reading from the Torah and they are helping the people to interpret what they're hearing so that they understand. You know, it's like the original model for small groups, or encounter groups if you lived through the 70's. I like to imagine the priests going out there with their small groups with questions like, "OK everybody, if you were a commandment, what commandment would you be?"

But you know the thing I think I like most about this text? It's what the people are expected to do. You know, when the temple was around, they viewed God as just hanging out there, just kind of passive and waiting. Religion was entirely up to us to do stuff. It was up to us to figure out what mistakes we made and what the penalties were. And then it was up to us to go to the temple, and remember they didn't care how far away you lived from the temple, you still had to go. And it was up to us to dig through our pockets to come up with some money to hand over to the priests. Religion was entirely about us- we were expected to be perfect, and then if we weren't perfect we were expected to do make sacrifice, which was supposed to make things better. Now, I've said before, some days it feels like I make 9 mistakes before breakfast. I mean I'd be spending all of my time going back and forth, back and forth. Countless pigeons, goats, and cows would lose their lives because of me. The guilt notwithstanding it sounds exhausting, doesn't it?

But what about Israel before the Water Gate? What are the people expected to do? It's so beautiful. What are they supposed to do? This tired, worn out people are not expected to *do* anything. They are asked simply to gather and to rest in the words

washing over them in wave after wave. For once in their lives the weight of world is removed from their shoulders, and they're asked to simply rest and listen.

So even though we might imagine the Israelites might be thinking don't just sit there, do something- the words they hear, the words they need are just the opposite. The word of the Lord to them: Don't just do things, but take some time to rest, too, to listen, and to learn.

In a sermon series on call, on what doors God is opening before us- it's so important that we attend to what we're hearing in Nehemiah. Nearly every sermon I've ever heard on call, including my own, winds up not being about God, but being about us. Yes, we remember that God is the one doing the calling, but then we put all this energy and time into figuring out what it is WE'RE supposed to be doing. We wonder about the ways WE'RE supposed to be responding. No matter how nicely it's put, it's so aggressive. It's more like a pep talk than a sermon. It's like no matter where you're coming from, no matter how bad your week is, you come to church and you get some pastor, some young, energetic pastor, who pesters you with wondering what YOU going to DO with this? As if God only ever calls us to action, and never to contemplation.

But here in this text, the people have just come back from exile. Exile! And Jerusalem's a mess. The temple is years from them even thinking about rebuilding it. And they don't even have a functional wall- something critical for an ancient town to have. It's not the time to go to these people wagging your finger wondering about what they're going to DO. They've got plenty to DO. No, here God calls them to something

so different. God calls them to simply gather at the gate, at the door, and to hear, to listen.

And isn't the word for us, too? As a culture we are so action oriented. When we meet someone for the first time the first question out of our mouths is almost always, "What do you do?", as if someone's work is somehow the skeleton key to their lives. And we like our religion this way, too. We Protestants say we're a people of grace, but are we? Most of us are only happy with our churches once we fill up the calendar to the gills and get so many groups and activities going that our faith communities add just as much stress to our lives as our jobs. I read an article last week on how to get the most out of church leaders without burning them out. And I thought to myself this is the worst thing I've ever heard of- it's like we pastors are supposed to view you all as horses to be ridden just up to the breaking point. Oh, sign me up for that church. How do I join? Of course, if it makes you feel any better pastors do the same thing to themselves.

Throughout the years pastors have aspired to different roles- we used to be resident theologians in the 50's, then we were like CEO's in the 60's, then in the 70's and 80's we became psychologists. Now, it seems like the model for pastors is to be a kind of ecclesiastical cruise ship director, dreaming up different activities to keep everyone busy. Well, it's great to be busy and to work. It is. But only when this work is in season. There is a time to speak and act. But there is also a time to keep silence, and to stand still, to wait.

In this season of call I do want you to ask yourselves what God is calling you to in the year ahead. I do. I want this to be the best year you've had in a long time. But I want to make sure that you hear that yes, God will be calling some of us to act, to work more and in different ways in the past. God is calling some of us to do something- something new. But for some of us, some of us may be called to take it down a notch, to carve out more time for silence, for stillness, for contemplation. Some of us are being called to rest before Israel's Water Gate. God is whispering to some of us: Don't just do something, stand there.

The consequences of missing our call to Israel's Water Gate can be disastrous. In 1972 five men break into a hotel room in Washington, DC. A young guard sees tape on the door locks and calls the police. The men are arrested for breaking and entering, and then two days later, their bosses, two guys named E. Howard Hunt and G. Gordon Liddy are arrested, too. Thus began the two year train wreck many of you lived through called the Watergate.

And it's one of the saddest, most tragic of American stories. You know, I always hear this story told as if it's just about Nixon, and his paranoia. And he certainly was nutty as a fruitcake. His list of enemies included Barbara Streisand, Joe Namath, and St. Louis Tribune. An actress, a quarterback, and a second rate paper. Not exactly lions, and tigers, and bears, there, right? Oh no, it's Barbara Streisand, and she's singing! Run! But this story to me is more than just about individual paranoia, it's about the grave consequences of preferring action to rest- even when it's out of season.

Nixon won the 1972 election against McGovern in a landslide, the only state McGovern got was Massachusetts. Nixon won with arm tied behind his back. He simply didn't need to resort to his plumbers unit to break into the Democratic National Headquarters. All he needed to do was to do nothing. Nothing! But he couldn't just leave it well enough alone. Nixon felt he had to act. And by acting, he destroyed not only himself, but the hard work of his staff, and the trust of a nation.

Friends, in this season of call, I do want you to get involved here at TPC, I do want you to have a great year engaged in whatever it is God would be having you do. But, I want us to hear these words from Nehemiah clearly- it may be that God calls us to action, but it also may be that we are being called to rest, to pull back, and to wait. Some of you may need to get off your tail and stop sitting there and DO something. But, this may be the season not just to do, but to be. **Amen.**