

Trinity Church in the City of Boston
The Rev. Morgan S. Allen
January 23, 2022
III Epiphany, Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

In 587 BCE, following deportations of Jewish kings from Jerusalem, the Babylonians conquered the holy city and destroyed its temple. This destruction of Solomon's grand achievement traditionally marks the beginning of "the Babylonian Exile," that period of roughly seventy years during which the Jewish people lived in diaspora, separated from one another and from their ancestral homeland.

The Babylonian Exile ended when the Persian King, Cyrus the Great, conquered Babylon and, by his decree, allowed the Jewish people's return to Jerusalem. Less than a generation after the Decree of Cyrus, the returning exiles laid a new Temple's foundation – sometime between 520 and 515 BCE – beginning the period known to the religious academy as "Second Temple Judaism," that stretch of Jewish history into which Jesus would eventually be born.

Today's lesson from Nehemiah narrates a moment not long after the laying of those first stones. The detail "on the first day of the seventh month" locates the event in early fall, in September or October, and, despite the faraway setting, the form of their worship should sound familiar: the people gather, and Ezra, a priest, reads from scripture. When Ezra opens the book, the people stand, and, when he finishes reading, he praises God. In response to this blessing, the people answer, "Amen, Amen." And Ezra "gives the sense" of the lesson, aiding the people's understanding, before he and the whole congregation bow, together, in common prayer.

Aside from the details of the preaching carrying on for hours and the people ecstatically raising their hands (church behaviors we Episcopalians tend to view, at best, as impolite) we can recognize glimmers of ourselves in these Jewish liturgics from nearly 2,600 years ago.

While we do not know exactly the condition of either Jerusalem or the nascent, second Temple in this particular moment from Nehemiah, the short book of the prophet Haggai, penned during these same years, complains that the house of the Lord still "lies in ruins, while [the returning exiles worry more about themselves and rebuilding their own homes]" than rebuilding the Temple of their God.ⁱ Haggai's strongly suggests that the city's earlier glory has not, yet, been restored. And upon hearing stories of their past renown, the people of this morning's appointment cry complicated tears.

Some in that old congregation cry tears of relief, for their turn in fortune seems scarcely less than a miracle: whatever the city's condition, they have returned to Jerusalem; they have reunited with family long feared lost; they have begun rebuilding the altar of their Temple; and they have even raised new walls for the city, signs and symbols that their new situation might endure.

Yet, others cry tears of defiance, for, after all, it's been a long time – *seventy years* – since these people lived in Jerusalem, and, in the process of making do, they've started new lives with a new order. Without the Temple to center their piety, they have found God at work wherever they lived. They have married the people of the lands where they found themselves, and they worry that the old robes and the old rituals will not fit their new habits.

Still others cry tears of a faithful bewilderment ... a *faithful bewilderment* ... upon hearing of their people's former glory. While appreciating how far they have recently come, they also understand the labor and sacrifice still before them. They have – *faithfully* – given so much to raise the humble, wooden dais upon which Ezra and Nehemiah now stand, and the human costs of a completed Temple loom dreadfully in their imaginations. Even as a righteous vision lifts their heart, overwhelm and worry traffic powerful doubts: Can it be done? Can *we* do it?

While we have not suffered the brutal exile of our forebearers in faith, the people of our day are living through a diaspora of a kind. All of us, in varying measures, are experiencing loss and separation ... grief and lonesomeness. Buckled as we are into the anxieties of this rollercoaster, Omicron surge, in combination with the disquiet of the pandemic's fast approaching two-year anniversary, our feelings intensify and our reactivity quickens. And, in these days, we, too, cry complicated tears.

Surely, we cry tears of relief that we have made it this far. Remaining mindful, as always, of those who have suffered more than what we have endured, we daily lay the foundation for a life beyond COVID: stone by stone, mask by mask, vaccine by vaccine. And we weep with amazement at the opportunity to worship together in this treasured temple ... weep with amazement at in-person reunions with family and friends, at even the possibility to dare travel plans, all of which, not so long ago, seemed *painfully* far away and not at all certain.

We also cry tears of defiance about the prospect of returning to a 2019 world, for it has been a long time since we lived in that former Jerusalem. Our work-from-home lives have found new rhythms and brought unexpected blessings, and no matter their imperfections, they have become our custom, if not our preference. Indeed, many of us worry that our old robes (and certainly our non-elastic britches) will no longer fit this new situation. And we weep in opposition to restarting the grind of the commute ... weep in opposition to that frenetic pace that too often led to our collective brokenness, rather than our shared wellness.

And we, too, cry tears of *faithful* bewilderment. Appreciating how far we have come, we begin the reconciliation of these last years, begin tallying their consequence. Taking stock of ourselves, of those we love, and of these institutions that give our lives their most precious meaning, we grapple just how much we have changed ... how much the world around us has changed. And for us within the Christian tradition and the Body of Christ at Trinity Church in the City of Boston, we appreciate the high stakes of this moment: we understand that the very viability of our traditions is in the balance. And we weep with overwhelm: yes, we aspire a faithful renewal, yet we also recall rebuilding that second temple took six hundred years! We realize we cannot take that long to get it right this time, and we hear doubt's harangue: Can it be done? Can *we* do it?

Ezra and Nehemiah speak into all these tears ... they face these great wonders and worries ... and they encourage their community: "Do not mourn or weep."ⁱⁱ

Importantly, the governor and the priest do not call for distraction from the real difficulties of their collective circumstance ... do not call for their community to ignore either their personal situations or the legion feelings their people have about them. Rather, they announce urgency for finding joy in their “daily bread.” They declare that their people’s path to restoration is *through* their challenges ... *through* greeting each moment as nothing less than the day of the Lord! ... not the first day ... not the last day ... but a *good* day, blessed with the unfailing company of God.

Trinitarians, as it was them, so it must be with us: this is the day that the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it. And with this kindest, gentlest of subversions, let us *reverse* the expected salvation economy. By the righteous power of our lives lived in love, let us declare that joy will no longer *follow* God’s blessing. Instead, may our brave joy *announce* God’s blessing, *bear* God’s blessing, *advance* God’s blessing. Let all the people shout – “Amen! Amen!” – and understand that **our joy must come first**.

For whatever is to come in this next season of the pandemic or that hopeful one beyond COVID’s grip, postponing our joy until some glorious goodness arrives will antagonize a blessed outcome and not bring it nearer. Indeed, we must dare joy *now*, even in this moment of anxiety and reactivity. Such brave joy relentlessly greets meanness with Grace, unfairness with understanding, and fear with hope. And as the lesson concludes, by “eat[ing] the fat and drink[ing the] sweet wine, [and] sending to those for whom nothing is prepared”ⁱⁱⁱ a portion of our table’s abundance, we will establish God’s glad favor. Yes! The faithful renewal of our emerging world *can* be accomplished and even *we* can inaugurate it, “For this day is holy to our [God and should not be grieved,], and [the] joy of the Lord will be our strength.”^{iv}

I pray for this brave joy *now*, and in the life of the world to come,
Amen.

ⁱ Haggai 1:9.

ⁱⁱ Nehemiah 8:9.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nehemiah 8:10.

^{iv} Ibid.