

I come in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don't know about you, but I'm feeling a sense of loss, disenchantment, even a little nostalgic. I remember the days when the only requirement to go anywhere was to be wearing a shirt and shoes. I remember the day at St. John's University when the students were giving away "free hugs", and I wasn't even a little hesitant to get one. I miss the care-free feeling when gathering with family, friends, and colleagues. I miss being able to share the 'sign of peace' with everyone present in a close and heart-felt way.

I grieve the loss of the art of compromise, respectful dialogue, and lively debates. I grieve the loss of close-knit neighborhoods where every child was everyone's child. I grieve the loss of feeling safe and well, knowing that even our holy places of worship are targets for violence.

Do you ever feel this way? We have been exiled from our homeland. Not our geographical home, but those homey feelings of comfort, joy, security, and love. In many ways, we have been evicted from those emotional and spiritual places that ground us, give us identity, traditions, and well-being.

In our reading from Nehemiah, the Israelites were returning to their homeland, to Jerusalem, after being exiled for 75 years, as a result of the Babylonian Exile.

They were settling in, reestablishing their roots, reclaiming their identity. A Temple had been reconstructed, after the destruction of Solomon's Temple, reestablishing their center of worship and tradition.

In our story today, it spoke of a gathering in the town square by the Water Gate. Rather than gathering in the Temple where space was limited, and only men were admitted, this crowd included men, women, and children. Everyone could attend. No one was excluded. A platform was built so people with spiritual authority could be seen and heard. The crowd was hungry for the words of God, and called on the leaders to read from Torah. They listened for hours, riveted to each word. They may have heard the story of creation. They may have heard, in Exodus, how God was with them through the desert, and never abandoned them. They may have heard how God was faithful to their ancestors and freed them from captivity. Those on the platform helped everyone understand what those words meant to them.

And the crowd's reaction? They were moved, they wept. It doesn't say why they wept. Perhaps, after embracing God's word, they may have grieved their transgressions and sins of the past. Perhaps they grieved all that they lost while in exile, their relationships, their identity, their traditions, their Temple.

Nehemiah, the governor of the land, commanded them to rejoice and celebrate. To eat and drink heartily. To give burnt offerings and share with the poor! Nehemiah references the “seventh month”. Rosh Hashanah, the modern day Jewish New Year’s Day, a Holy Day that corresponds to that time of year. Nehemiah calls for a new beginning, a time of hope and celebration, a time for **renewal**. It is not a time to grieve the past, but to place the past in its sacred and rightful place in history. It is a time to look forward and upward, to work towards spiritual and emotional prosperity. It is a time of liberation.

In our Gospel today, Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, comes out of the desert, and goes to the Temple. He takes a place of authority and honor, and reads from Torah, the same words of God that Ezra read 500 years prior. He selects a reading from the prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He 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."

Then, to make things crystal clear to his audience, he tells them that He is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy. He is beginning a ministry of renewal, hope,

and liberation. It was a time the poor and marginalized could look forward and upward.

At the time of Jesus, we know that life in Jerusalem was oppressive, unjust, violent, and difficult. Scholars suggest that Luke wrote his gospel in about 85C.E. -- 15 years after the Jewish Revolt of 70C.E. This uprising resulted in the loss of countless lives, homes were destroyed, families were separated, and traditions were lost. Some citizens were imprisoned, and many Jewish rebels were sold into slavery. And the Second Temple (the one from Nehemiah's time) was destroyed, never to be rebuilt. One would have to think that it was a time in which people longed for the past, grieved what was lost, and felt exiled, even if not geographically. Life was hard.

I can't help but wonder what Luke was thinking. At the time of his writing, the Roman Empire was under siege from multiple fronts. The oppressor was becoming the oppressed. I wonder if the words Jesus' spoke, a voice of spiritual authority, resonated with the early Christians. Could they see that God is a God of liberation? Could they see that the oppressed, poor, and captive, are those whom God favors most. It is those who have nothing upon which to cling, who have God's attention!

Do you ever feel like the Israelites? Do you feel the loss of our “Temple”, having to worship from our own homes, in sort of an exile? Are you imprisoned by physical, emotional, or spiritual ailments? Are you being persecuted by those who don’t share your same world views, or look or act like you? Do you feel like your well-being is in peril?

Jesus’ words are as pertinent now as they were 2000 years ago, and Isaiah’s before that. By clinging to Jesus, we can endure, in hope, the uncertainty of our times, the pain and suffering, the losses, and the grief. Just as Torah tells stories about God’s faithfulness to His people, you can be assured that God’s promise of love and care rises above adversity, and leads to liberation and renewal. In Jesus, there will be good news to the poor, those held captive by physical, emotional, and spiritual afflictions will be freed. Those who are blinded by selfishness and greed will gain sight, and those who are oppressed by social biases, assumptions, and stereotypes will find acceptance.

So, this is not a time to cling to the past, but rather reach for the future in Christ. Remember and honor the past, but do not let it blind your vision of hope in Christ. Do not be imprisoned by transgressions and sins of the past, but accept forgiveness and be set free in Christ.

Do not let unjust social biases, assumptions, and stereotypes define you, but rather live in the love and acceptance of Christ.

In these difficult times, may you trust in God to carry you through physical, emotional, and spiritual afflictions. May you look towards the light of Christ to remove any blindness caused by events of the past or present. May His light brighten your future. May you rest in the assurance that God loves you for who you are, as you are, and as one of His own. May you embrace this time to be one of renewal. May you find liberation in the promise of a hope-filled future in Christ. Amen.