

Today is January 23<sup>rd</sup>, almost a month has passed since Christmas Eve, and I have relistened to our Christmas Eve service more than three times already. You could say I'm just one of those people who doesn't want Christmas to end, but, in my defense, our Christmas tree is put away. Although – the cat breaking one too many ornaments off of it might've been a larger factor for on-time de-decorating this year. But, tree or no tree, hearing so many voices saying the words: Do not be afraid, hearing that we find these words throughout scripture, hearing that the good news for all people is peace on earth and goodwill to all, hearing about reconciliation between God and humanity, hearing about the lengths God will go to show us God's steadfast love, it brings me to tears every time and I never get tired of hearing that holy story. I also love hearing how it moved and moves y'all. After the service, I went up to one of the readers and said, I heard those tears in your voice as you read and I want to say thank you: for sharing your heart, for showing your passion, for letting the beauty of the story really shine through your spirit. Honestly, all y'all deserve copious thank you notes. You preached the gospel, and it was true and beautiful and moving. I've been relistening on loop. So, I thought of that moment when I first read today's passage from Nehemiah.

“For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.”

This verse stood out to Presbyterian Pastor W. Carter Lester as well. Why are they weeping, the reverend asks. “Perhaps they were overcome with regret for the loss of the Torah during the exile. Perhaps they have been reminded of how far short their actions have fallen from God's expectations of them. Or perhaps their tears are tears of joy, for the recovery of the Torah and for a sense of God's abiding presence and providential care.”

All three of those perhaps(es) are possible. Knowing the context of the story helps us discern its direction. Ezra-Nehemiah is a story of struggle: where a whole people have seen their city destroyed, been dragged off into exile, and then a remnant return to rebuild the temple, rebuild the city walls, and redefine who they are as a people after they have been through so much trauma. It's not an easy endeavor. They have lost so much. Even as they try to rebuild, there is disagreement on how to do so, disagreement on who gets to do so, and disagreement on

whether this can even be done. There is no returning to what they once were. Perhaps this reading of the Torah is a reminder of everything they can never get back, and they weep.

This story is also told in parallel to another story of revival amongst God's chosen people. Before the exile, the people had forgotten to follow God's law. Then, during the reign of King Josiah, the Book of the Law was found and read out loud. The response of the boy king was to tear his clothes, "because," he said "our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us." The law often has this effect on those who read its instructions. Theologians have long recognized a dual purpose of the moral law: "First, the law restrains evil in the world and preserves order...(it) serves as a deterrent to wrongdoing and, failing that, punishes the transgressor through its application by proper authorities. Second, the law exposes sin in the world and the life of the believer...these two purposes...show our weakness and improper relationship with God and neighbor." Being faced with all your flaws in this way is very difficult. Perhaps, for all the people gathered to hear this reading of the Torah, hearing has brought up a deep sense of responsibility, conviction, and shame, and they weep.

But the third perhaps? The "perhaps" that they are weeping tears of joy? The third perhaps was my first understanding of this text. Maybe it's because a year ago today, I still hadn't been able to worship in a church with my community since the pandemic started. Maybe it's because I remember in my very body – the tears I felt well up in my eyes, and the sobs shaking in the chest, when I first Felt, not just heard, but Felt, the organ music playing, upon reentering a church building for the first time in nearly a year. Maybe it's because certain words of scripture still make me want to weep with joy when I hear them read out loud in community. That's why, even when I had to watch from home, gathering and listening to the word of God read still held such importance, even if I couldn't be there exactly as I'd like to be, hearing the Word read out loud really mattered.

I don't think I'm alone there: there is a special power to hearing 1 Corinthians 13: "Love is patient, Love is kind" read, especially at a wedding. There is a special resonance in Psalm 139 when I hear my transgender brother or sister in Christ, or my sibling in Christ who identifies as nonbinary, read: "You knit me together in my mother's womb, I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Through the voice of the Holy Spirit, through their

affirming community of Christians lovingly surrounding them, they understand Psalm 139 as affirmation: God's word to them on their journey. As one trans Christian pastor joyfully explained his epiphany to me, that just as God loves to reform and create, God's transgender children are called to reform and reflect their creator as they change their bodies to align with the God-given idea they have of themselves in their mind. "Your works are wonderful, I know that full well." For all the people gathered together at the Water Gate, where even the ritually unclean could be included, there was a special power in hearing these words from the Torah. My best guess at which passage got the joy tears flowing – is Exodus 34:5 and 10.

"The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation ... Then the LORD said: "I am making a covenant with you."

Upon hearing this holy story – this intimate encounter, upon understanding this revelation – all the people, all together, once again? Yes, I think these people were weeping for joy. Joy that they were all together. All the people, all together. Joy that they could finally understand what was passed on. Joy that they had survived to inherit this holy story. Joy that God reached out to them. Joy that God's own story, God's own choosing, God's own words, could be the answer to all their disagreement, that God would be the one to hold them, all the people, together. Perhaps they were overwhelmed with joy, and they wept.

Indeed, John Calvin, one of our great fathers in the reformed faith tradition, did not think the law was just meant to keep sin in check and show us how sinful we are. Psalm 19 calls the law "sweeter than the honey from the comb." We 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians often read Psalm 19 and think, I don't really love Leviticus or Deuteronomy all that much, but I love Jesus' law. Fine. I'm all about the Holy Spirit helping us find fresh meanings for the text in our present day lives. But you're missing something when you don't realize that Psalm 19 is a poem written about the Torah – about Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. And Calvin says there is plenty to love about the Torah: he sees this book as a beloved teacher – the "best instrument for (us) to learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will to which (we) aspire, and to confirm (us) in the understanding of it." We see all the people who gathered together to hear the law read out loud for hours on end, treating the law in just that way. Weeping with joy and learning from what the law says as if this book was their beloved Rabbi.

In Deuteronomy 26:12 it says to give produce to “the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns.” And what do all the people do at the end of today’s passage? They, “send portions of “fat and sweet wine” to those for whom nothing is prepared. They listen to the love of their teacher the Torah, and it makes a difference in how they love their neighbor.

Y’all it is the season of Epiphany in the Church Liturgical Year. From now until March we are reading passages through that lens: what is revealed about God in each story. What stories can we share from our own lives where God has revealed something about Godself to us? In the story of the magi, we saw that God reveals Godself to be God who reaches out to the foreigner. In the story of Jesus’ baptism, God reveals Godself to be God who adopts us as God’s own, choosing to be baptized in solidarity with sinners. In the story of Jesus’ first sign, turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana, God reveals Godself to be the most gracious host, the abundant provider, the extravagant God, the God who loves a good party. In today’s passage, we see that God reveals Godself to be God who shows up amongst All the People. And it is there that they weep. It is there that they share. It is there that they understand, never on their own, but through interpretation, what God is trying to say to all the people.

The lectionary passage for today left out all the multisyllabic names of the people who were gathered. But I read them today because they are there to remind us: each name matters. Each person who hears these words together matters. If, thousands of generations later, one person is missing because we did not welcome and affirm them in exactly the way God made them, it matters. I think every person there told their kids they were there and their kid’s kids told their kids they were there. They may have told them which passages it was that they heard in Hebrew, a language they had almost forgotten, and then it was interpreted to them in Aramaic, the language of the returning survivors, the exiles, and then it resonated with them so much that they wept...they told that story over and over again. That’s why we know their names. I bet there are a lot of different verses that would resonate. It makes me itch to reread the Torah, the whole Bible in fact. I’m so happy that I’m planning to do that along many other TikTok pastors, and I’ve been inviting anyone from our congregation who feels led to join me on the journey through our facebook livestreams. We’ve already made it through Matthew and Mark! Maybe, if you do decide to join, (and there is no “should” in this space, only grace), as we read in community, you’ll find new passages that God speaks through to you. I say one of Jesus’ favorite passages at the beginning of each live reading: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” That is the lens through which we read scripture. I also quote 1 John 3 “God is love” and “perfect love casts out fear.” I’m evoking the whole passage when I do that because I really believe: “Whoever does not love, (not just in words but in actions of welcome and affirmation) does not (really) know God, because God is love.” I’m looking forward to hearing how God reveals Godself to you in the text, and in your lives, and in this space. Amidst all the people, God reveals, again and again, that God likes to show up where we are All gathered around the word, listening with love together, and then we spread that love to our neighbor. Hallelujah. Amen.