

Nehemiah 8:1-10 (NRSV)

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."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are two great figures in the history of Judaism: Moses and Ezra. Everyone knows about Moses. Hardly anyone knows about Ezra. And that's too bad.

Everyone knows about Moses. Moses, the miracle worker, worked plagues on Pharaoh to get him to let the Israelites go – turned

the Nile to blood, brought on the plagues of locusts and frogs, turned his staff into a snake. Parted the Red Sea. You've got to be big time if you expect Charlton Heston to play you in the movies.

Moses led the people in the Exodus, wandering in the desert for 40 years. Moses the lawgiver, came down from the mountaintop with the Ten Commandments, broke them all up and had to go back up and get another set. Moses who talked with God as a friend. Moses who wrote down the Law in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the Pentateuch. Moses who was not allowed to bring the people into the land God had promised them and who died and is buried somewhere beyond the Jordan River. Moses is the Old Testament figure most frequently mentioned in the New Testament. Who could forget Moses?

But Ezra, what does anyone know about Ezra? Ezra is the subject of the Old Testament reading today. If you've memorized the books of the Old Testament you'll remember "First and Second Kings, First and Second Chronicles, *Ezra*, Nehemiah, Esther" – yes, that Ezra. Ezra and Nehemiah are linked together and both of them are figures from the period of Judah's history called the Exile. Just as Moses led the people during the Exodus, Ezra led them after the Exile.

Remember from your confirmation, the people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt and Moses led them to the Promised Land in the story that is related in the Exodus, right? And the people of Israel lived in the Promised Land for hundreds of years and asked God for a king, which he gave them – the first king was Saul and the second king was David and David was king over both the Northern Kingdom, Israel and the Southern Kingdom, Judah. But the united kingdom didn't last very long and after a while, the Northern Kingdom, Israel, was conquered and only the Southern Kingdom, Judah remained. But in 586 BCE, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, burned down Solomon's Temple and took most of the middle and upper class Judeans into exile in Babylon, for a period of about fifty years. When Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon, the

Judeans were allowed to return to Jerusalem. So, that's an overview of the history of Israel – Exodus, Kings, Conquest, Exile and Return.

I apologize for the history lesson, and you're allowed to ask, why is this important? A couple of reasons. First, the story that the Bible relates, in both the New and the Old Testaments, consists of themes,¹ and these themes are found in the history of many peoples, not just the historic people of God, the Israelites. The Israelites were slaves, for a time, and many peoples have been slaves for a time. Obviously our African Americans come to mind, of course, but virtual slavery was also the fate of much of Eastern Europe, of our Native Americans, early and late immigrants to the United States. And many people today are enslaved in various ways, to addictions, to terrible relationships and experiences and memories, to illness and disease. So the theme of slavery and release from it, the theme of freedom that we pick up in the Old Testament is a powerful theme for us, too. And the idea that God can free us is a powerful theme in our own longings and prayers. "Let me go, let me live the life I was meant to live, free me from these chains, O please God, help me to be free," these are words we can understand deeply.

But there's another great theme in the Bible, the feeling of Exile – the feeling of living in a land where we don't belong. Again, the Israelites felt this in Babylon. But I'm sure that our immigrant ancestors who came to these shores from different languages and different customs and cultures, they felt the same way. And not just cultures – do you remember the feeling when you went off to grade school or high school or college, when you left your family to begin a new family, when you moved to a new job or a new town? The feeling of homesickness, that you'll never fit in, that you'll lose yourself in this strange place. This feeling of being a stranger in a strange land is a universal human experience – and the idea that God is with us, God provides for us a home and a welcome wherever we are, this, too is a theme in the Bible.

¹ I'm indebted to Marcus Borg, in whose writings I first discovered the idea of themes in the Bible. See his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*.

You see, the theme of the Bible that we Christians are most attuned to is the Priestly theme – that there is someone who speaks to God on our behalf. In the Old Testament, those are the prophets – in the New Testament, that is Jesus, of course. And that is a very important theme because we cannot stand before our righteous God all alone, and we know it. But to reduce the Bible to just one theme is to miss all these other beautiful themes that apply to all peoples at all times.

So, another theme is the theme of enslavement and freedom – the theme of the Exodus. And a third theme is the theme of estrangement and return to our true home, the theme of Exile. And let me argue to you that this third theme, the theme of Exile, is a very important theme for us today.

We live in a world that doesn't make too much sense from a biblical point of view. Our popular culture denies how precious life is – our television shows are violent and our heroes are cruel and vicious, and victory belongs to the last one standing. We celebrate the accumulation of money and property and toys. We are haters and we are good at it. We are destroying our natural environment and bankrupting our future to accumulate more goodies now. Any Christian who feels at home in this culture hasn't been paying much attention. But this culture is all around us, in our music and our videos and our Xboxes – where can we go to feel at home?

In the reading from Nehemiah, today, the people of God are asking the same question. We feel lost and out of place. Where is our home? They have been returned to Jerusalem, but for many of them, this is not home – they have been away fifty years, and some had *never* been in Jerusalem before this time. Even the ones who had been taken into exile -- they have been returned to what they understand to be their home, but they don't feel at home, not at all.

The people of Jerusalem who had never left don't really like them. They don't understand why these exiles want everything to go

back to the way it was before the exile. We did pretty well without you and now you're back and you want everything to change.

So, Ezra gathers the people together – it is significant that it is *all* the people, men and women and children. He gathers them in the public square – not in the Temple, because women and children were not allowed in the Temple. And in front of everyone who could understand, he reads the scroll of the law – some summary of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the Pentateuch, the same law that Moses brought down from the mountaintop. And for six or eight hours, nonstop, a very long sermon by our standards, he reads them the law.

Because their home is not Jerusalem – their home is God, the God they meet in Scripture, wherever they are. And that is the genius of Ezra, why he is called the father of Judaism. Because he understands that the people of God are not the people of a particular land but rather of a particular book and wherever these people live they are united by this book and by the God who speaks in and through it. He knows that the people need to understand this book and the story it tells, a story that includes both law and promise and that all of it, the law and the promise are both good, as good as good food and sweet wine and sharing them with friends.

In *our* exile in this culture that is so foreign to us and to God, we do well to look again to this book, this book of law and promise or as we call it Law and Gospel, the good news of what God has done for us, to give us Jesus as our high priest, to give us freedom from the powers by which we are enslaved and to give us a home in exile, and the good news of how we might live as people ruled by our high priest, freed from slavery and given a home in exile.

Amen.