

“Review”

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

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On Friday, we had the joy of hosting the Not Ready for Prime Timers Group at our house for a game night. The Not Ready for Prime Timers Group is for adults roughly 55 and under, although we don't card anybody at the door.

We played a game called “Celebrity.” Each player (in our case there were 22 players) writes the names of five celebrities on five pieces of paper. These names are placed in a bowl. Next all the players pair up. Each team then plays the guessing game. Draw a slip with a name on it. That person gives clues about the celebrity and the partner tries to guess who it is. I should add that “celebrity” is loosely defined.

It was great fun to watch each team try to figure out as many “celebrities” as possible in one minute. American history was rewritten in at least one case as there was some apparent confusion between Paul Revere and Lady Godiva!

Some of the celebrities people listed on the papers were really quite obscure. Even my husband who knows more obscure people and facts than anyone I know was stumped by at least one celebrity—someone he'd never heard of.

I wish now that I had put Ezra and Nehemiah as two of my submissions. Even for people who like the Bible, these “celebrities” are not among the most well-known.

Who in the world are Ezra and Nehemiah? Just in case you find yourself in a game of “Celebrity” in the near future, take note! Ezra and Nehemiah were Israelites, also known as the Hebrews or the Jews. They lived during the time of the Babylonian exile and the time when some of the exiles returned to the land of Judah to rebuild their city, their temple, their faith and their lives.

We probably need to back up a bit. The Hebrews in the land of Judah were overtaken by the Babylonians. The Babylonians started

deporting people out of Judah to Babylon as early as 597 B.C. Over the next 10 years, tens of thousands of people were deported. The capital city, Jerusalem, was pretty much destroyed. The city walls and the temple (where the Israelites worshipped) were demolished.

The Israelites were exiles in Babylon for 50-60 years. Then, when Babylon got a taste of its own medicine and got overtaken by Persia, the Persians allowed the Israelites to go home. We think about 40,000 chose to return to Judah.

Ezra and Nehemiah, themselves formerly exiles in Babylon, played important leadership roles in Jerusalem as the Israelites rebuilt their city walls, the temple and their faith. Ezra was a priest and a scribe – more of a religious leader who helped the people get “back to the Bible.” Nehemiah was a godly political leader – a governor.

The lesson we are focusing on today from the book of Nehemiah actually stars the “celebrity” Ezra.

The real shocker is this. The Israelites come to Ezra and ask Ezra to come to a central location and read aloud to them the Torah – the first five books of our Old Testament. Let me rephrase, the people asked for a long scripture reading and sermon – really long. They asked Ezra to read aloud to them the stories of their ancestors, the promises of God, the 10 commandments and so much more. They asked to hear about when God’s people experienced another time of exile – when they were enslaved in Egypt. They wanted to hear how God delivered them and gave them a new start. They were hungry for God’s word. They were so hungry they’d listen to Ezra read from the Torah for days, with someone else translating from Hebrew to Aramaic for those who had lost the Hebrew language in exile and someone interpreting the stories. They were hungry. They wanted to hear the old, old stories. They needed a review as they started a new chapter of their lives. It was a grassroots initiative by the people – the exiles returned home – to hear God’s Word read and interpreted for them.

One of the pediatricians at the Children’s Clinic (where I take our son, Cameron) has written a book titled: *Daddy, Tell Me a Story About When You Were Little: A Rotten Kid Grew Up to be a Pediatrician.*

The author, Dr. Bruce Kauder, was diagnosed with cancer in 2006. During his treatments he decided to write for his daughters all the bedtime stories he had told them about his mischievous childhood. He was afraid they'd forget these stories after he was dead. He wanted them to be able to review a part of their childhood and in turn, his childhood, through these stories. The book is now published and contains 224 stories.

Sometimes we need to look back so we can move forward. We need to hear the stories again in order to re-ground ourselves, to remember who we are and where we've come so that we can move forward and make new beginnings. Frankly, sometimes we don't always get the history exactly correct (although being as far off as confusing Paul Revere and Lady Godiva can be problematic!) But even when the history isn't exactly right, the truths are there and they are right. The feelings are there. What stands out when we tell these stories are the relationships.

When Ezra read the Torah to the people who asked that it be read to them, when Ezra read the old, old stories, the people listened attentively, they worshipped God and they wept.

It's important to note that the people didn't worship the Torah itself. They worshipped God – the God whose relationship with the people is chronicled in the Torah. It's important to note that the people didn't worship Ezra. They worshipped God – the God who had called and equipped Ezra, yes – but not Ezra.

It's a danger when we are moved by God's Word that we will get too caught up in the messenger. It's a danger when we are moved by God's Word that we will worship the Bible instead of the One to whom the Bible points us.

Something happened in the hearts of the Israelites when they heard the old, old stories. They wept. I wonder why? Do you suppose it was sort of like looking at old family photo albums, remembering the stories and weeping for days gone by and people long gone? Do you suppose it was like looking at those pictures and remembering the painful times, the family drama only slightly concealed? Do you suppose it was like looking back and realizing where you went wrong and what you wished

you had done differently? You might grieve because there's a part of you that wishes you could rewrite some parts of the family history or your behavior, and add new photographs.

I think there must have been a cluster of mixed emotions for the Israelites who had been exiled so long to hear again their sacred history – to hear how their ancestors had again and again sinned and rejected God and how God again and again delivered them, loved them, forgave them. I suspect they wept in part because they were overwhelmed by a history of God loving them and keeping His promises.

Anathea Portier-Young, professor at Duke Divinity School, says: For “as surely as the Torah reveals to us our sins, it also reveals to us the source of our hope: the God who keeps promises. It reveals to us the God who bridged the gulf by making a covenant with Abraham; who promised Jacob “I am with you and I will protect you everywhere you go”; who heard the cry of the people enslaved in Egypt and delivered them from oppression; who forgives sins; who vindicates God’s people when their strength is gone. (workingpreacher.org)

Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites (who were the priests) told the people not to grieve. This is a day for joy. This is a sacred day. This is a day to enjoy God’s abundance and to share that abundance with others. This is a day of hope because God is faithful.

Do you remember the words from the call to worship from Psalm 19? It seems these words express well what the returned exiles felt about God’s Law – the Torah. **“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.”** I wonder if there is any hope of our feeling about God’s Word like this. I suppose I have most experienced this sense of awe and appreciation for God’s Word when I have been most hungry for God, hungry for grace and hungry for hope.

I know this sermon has gone on about as long as Ezra's (!) but I want to remind you of words we sang at the beginning of our worship service as I close.

(From #2246 – “Word of God in Human Language” Jane Parker Huber)

*Word of God in human language for this time and in our tongue,
Tell a-new the ageless story, ever ancient, ever young.
May our hearts receive the message of God's faithful, loving care;
May our lives respond in action, living deed and living prayer.*

*Everywhere the world is hungry for the liberating Word,
Food for spirit as for body, to be tasted, felt and heard.
It is thus the Word encounters at God's own appointed hour,
Bringing knowledge and perception of true justice, peace and power.*

*So God's voice continues speaking in the words we can't deny,
Sounding out across the ages, will we answer or defy?
As the call becomes still clearer, witness that the Word shall last,
May we follow with commitment in the present as the past.*