“The People of Israel’s Tears”

A Sermon by The Rev. Rachel Wildman

for the 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany, 2022

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

# Scripture Referenced: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10, and Luke 4:14-21

Of all our scriptures this morning, each rich with imagery, what drew me back again and again was the scene from Nehemiah. The people of Israel—the Jews-- gathered outdoors in the square….begging for scripture! It was not Ezra, the priest, who initiated it…but the people. All the people of Israel….present for this public reading of the law of Moses *at their own request*. Not just the learned…not just those who could read and write…not even just adults…It was as it says--those who could understand AND those who couldn’t. Everyone so moved by the opening of the book that their bodies responded…they lifted up their hands, and then bowed their heads. For hours they listened to scripture with rapt attention. And then at the end…they wept.

I haven’t revisited this period in the history of God’s chosen people since seminary, which is long-gone in my working memory. So, as I first sat with our readings, I wondered, just what is going on here? What has moved these folks to gather in the square, to call out for scripture and worship, and then to weep?

Well, my work this week reminded me that quite a lot is going on here! This moment in the life of the people of Israel comes after the most powerful and educated among them were forced into more than a half-century of captivity in Babylon as punishment for rising up against the Babylonian Kingdom. Many of these died while in exile, but under new occupation by Persia, their children and grandchildren (most of whom have known only exile in Babylon) have been permitted to return to Jerusalem, to rejoin the children and grandchildren of those who stayed. They have spent significant time and hard work rebuilding their temple, which was destroyed by the Babylonians, and have now gathered themselves—all of themselves—those whose lives have been spent entirely in exile and those who have had to make space for them to return---in this square. As their first action as a re-gathered people, they have asked for Ezra, their priest, not only to be among them, but to bring the law of Moses.

Ok! Now we are getting somewhere…The radical inclusivity of the gathering…the hunger for a common language or experience or history …this profound moment feels so familiar to me. It has an echo for me of regathering in New Orleans, outside, at the first Jazz Fest after Hurricane Katrina...an echo of our first really well-attended in-person service regathered in this sanctuary after COVID lock-down….

As I drop into this familiar feeling, I can imagine the weeping at the end, too. Being part of a community who re-gathers after a challenging experience is moving—it unlocks so much that the danger or chaos of a situation requires us to stifle. I imagine the people of Israel are weeping both with joy at coming back together, but also with grief at all of the pain the exile and forced separation wrought.

But, unfortunately, this is not the whole of the story. The tears that the People of Israel shed likely also represent new wounds issued by Ezra, himself.[[1]](#footnote-1) Because, I learned in my sermon prep, this was not actually the first re-gathering of the People of Israel. Ezra had re-gathered them the first time, very recently, also to proclaim the law—an event from which he used the law to justify a decree that all Israelite men who had married a non-Israelite woman during the period of exile should divorce them, and send them, and any of their mixed-race children, away. In order to avoid any future trauma, the chosen people of God, he argued, needed to regain their uniformity, insulate themselves, and reclaim a focused dedication to their God.

For me, that changes all that seems familiar about this wildly inclusive re-gathering. For, it now seems possible that all of the people gather and *demand* to hear the law interpreted again in order to challenge Ezra’s interpretation of it---they *bow their heads* in urgent, frantic prayer to God that someone—if not Ezra than the Levites chosen to teach alongside him—will perceive the presence of God’s transforming love even, perhaps especially, in the expanding of the chosen People of God that has been invited by these intermarriages. They listen with *rapt attention* because their families are at stake in the interpretations offered. And…the weeping…The weeping it would seem, is just as likely righteous anger that at this second public reading, the interpretation of the law has remained the same…that the destruction wrought by Babylon will now be wrought by the leaders of Israel, themselves —Like Babylon, *they* now will tear families apart, label some folks as “dangerous outsiders,” and govern their people from a place of fear.

And, in the face of this anguished weeping, Ezra and the other interpreters have the audacity to tell the Israelites not to mourn…but instead, to be joyful in the Lord.

What began my week as a source of familiar inspiration and hope, became instead, a very hard space in which to spend time.

It became a hard space not only because I wept for the People of Israel, but also because it caused me to weep for us. So very unfortunately, the angry, anguished weeping of the Israelites is just as familiar to many of us as may have been the weeping occasioned by a long-awaited re-gathering. We, too, are at a place where those who govern from a place of fear would like to make the definitive interpretation.

I am reminded, in particular, of the legislation introduced by over 20 states in the past year to limit the teaching of racial history in schools and the recent banning by numerous school districts of children’s books that provide experiences of what it is like to live as a non-white person in America.

The deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and so many others spurred institutional and individual conversation and action that has gone farther than at any time in our recent past to promote racial justice. But now, we are seeing the backlash…We hear from many public figures across the country Ezra’s same mistaken notion that future trauma can only be prevented by pursuing uniformity and insularity—in these cases, by allowing for only one experience of our present, and a version of our history that sweeps anguish under the carpet.

In the Jewish scriptures, interpretations like this do not have the last word. There are other interpretations and other interpreters…ones that affirm the radical inclusivity embodied by the crowd of Israelites gathered in the square by the Water Gate. Perhaps best known to many of us are Ruth and Naomi, whose wildly inclusive interpretation of God’s law of love sits as a bold challenge to Ezra’s.

We cannot let the fear-based interpretations have the last word now, either. We need to demand other interpreters, or be them, ourselves. Not only because we are students of the Jewish Scriptures, but also because we are followers of Jesus, a student of the Jewish Scriptures, himself, who lived and died for inclusivity…who proclaimed wild inclusion in *his* version of the public square in the very scripture we heard this morning, “*he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free*.”

Those words are just what I said--an *interpretation*! They are not found as a unit anywhere in the scroll of Isaiah …what Jesus proclaimed was a mash-up of a chunk of Isaiah 58 and a chunk of Isaiah 61…. In this, *I* hear Jesus proclaiming Good News for those who are poor, imprisoned, blind, or oppressed, *and* *also* proclaiming that there is space for interpretation in our Holy Scriptures and that space must be used always for the purpose of making bigger, not smaller, the community of those who are embraced and empowered. Always for the purpose of making wider…If there is anything definitive in our scriptures, anything around which there is actually *no* space for interpretation, *it is this*, at least as *I* interpret it.

I pray that today, indeed, the Good News of God in Christ, and all the interpretations it calls us to, be fulfilled in *our* hearing.

AMEN.

1. This possibility of the cause of weeping was suggested by commentator Cory Driver as published by Workingpreacher.og: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-nehemiah-81-3-5-6-8-10-5>, accessed 1/22/22 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)