

Eat the Fat, Drink Sweet Wine

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

The Third Sunday After the Epiphany/ Year C

January 24, 2010

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. AMEN.

In the winter of 1972, the rains came to Logan County, West Virginia. While such inclement weather is not all that unusual for this area of steep valleys and high ridges, the heavy downpours brought with them the makings of a disaster. On the night of the twenty-fifth of February, officials of the Pittston Mining Company, began anxiously monitoring the water level behind the Buffalo Creek Dam. With each passing hour, they grew more distressed as the water, tinged black by coal dust and mine waste, rose toward the crest of the impoundment. By eight o'clock the following morning, the dam had become, in the understated words of one of the local inspectors, "soggy". Five minutes after this disturbing observation was made, the Buffalo Creek Dam collapsed. One hundred and thirty-two million gallons of wastewater roared like a freight train through the narrow valley. In a matter of minutes, one hundred and twenty-five people were dead, eleven hundred injured and four thousand left homeless. The small, intimately linked, communities of the Buffalo Creek Hollow were obliterated.

In his award-winning study of the Buffalo Creek tragedy, entitled Everything In Its Path, sociologist Kai Erikson interviews and analyzes the thoughts, feelings and experiences of those who survived the raging flood waters. He uncovers a community wrought with fears and plagued by one principal question: "Where do we go from here. How do we move beyond this moment into moments yet to be." You see, the stories they had told themselves about their lives, about who they were as a community and as individuals lay in shattered ruins. There were no happy endings here, nor were there necessarily bad endings. The people were simply trapped by the tragedy around them, They were unable to move forward or to even conceive that an end, good or bad, was possible. The experience of the Buffalo Creek community is the experience of all communities robbed of their stories. Their experience is mirrored, just as our own experiences are mirrored, in the trials and tribulations of ancient Israel. "How **do** we move forward when the stories we've told ourselves no longer make sense. Today's reading from the Book of Nehemiah at least, suggests, a possible answer.

Now, I am fairly positive that when you came to church this morning, you were not expecting a sermon on Nehemiah. Of all the lections appointed to be read this day, the others are far more familiar and, perhaps, at first glance, more interesting. In the epistle lesson, Saint Paul, delivers a good solid harangue on the subject of spiritual gifts and disunity to the parishioners of Corinth, his message as timely today as it ever was. Saint Luke, not to be out done, presents Our Lord's rather impressive sermon in his hometown synagogue, the very same synagogue out of which he will be unceremoniously chased at the conclusion of next week's gospel. With two such noble voices vying for our attention, it seems a little odd, even presumptuous, that Nehemiah would stroll into

the pulpit, grab our hands and ask us to accompany him to Jerusalem.

In Nehemiah's day, the Jewish people would have readily understood that celebrated phrase: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." For seventy years, they had been living along the rivers of Babylon, scratching out a meager existence. They were a captive population, almost a slave class. But then one fine morning, much to their surprise they were told to go home. They were told to leave Babylon and return to Judah, to the land of their ancestors. The order to emigrate did not come about through some miraculous change in Babylon's heart, nor through some God bestowed epiphany. Quite the contrary, Babylon, as powerful as she was, fell victim to her own politics. She was forced to choke down a dose of her own medicine. Just as she had captured Jerusalem, so many years earlier, now she lay captive to Persia. And it was the Persian King, Cyrus the Great, who sent the Jews packing. Any astute observer would have undoubtedly seen Cyrus' decision for the crass and politically motivated affair that it was. After all, how else could the Persian King establish a new governorship, a puppet state over the lands of Judah? While Cyrus' motives may have been less than pure, for the Jews his motives didn't matter. They were going home, though they weren't sure what home was anymore or even what "home" meant. This was, indeed, the best of times. The worst of times, well, that was yet to come.

Leaving the relative safety of Babylon, the Jewish people make an arduous trek across the wilderness back to what their forefather's called "the promised land." Upon arrival, the impoverished community is met with one of the most disheartening sights that they could ever imagine- Jerusalem in complete and utter ruin. The walls, which once surrounded their magnificent capital, lie in piles of broken brick and mortar. What remains of their once glorious Temple is little more than a mountain of stone, a monument to silence mourned only by the occasional breeze. When word of this sorry state of affairs makes its way back to the Persian Court, the King couldn't care less. But, as luck or divine purpose would have it, there is someone not far removed from the throne who, no matter how hard he may try, cannot get Jerusalem off his mind.

The devastation of the old Jewish capital hit Nehemiah, the King's cupbearer, rather profoundly. Scripture records that Nehemiah fell to the ground and wept. Upon pulling himself together, he goes to King Artaxerxes, who had replaced old Cyrus on the throne, and asks the monarch for permission to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the city's walls. After hemming and hawing, the King grants Nehemiah permission, so long as "the royal cup-bearer" understands that he is not to stay there forever. Artaxerxes, even goes so far as to give Nehemiah, the governorship of the province.

Over the course of the next twelve years, with Nehemiah squarely at the helm, the once magnificent walls of Jerusalem are slowly and painstakingly rebuilt (though not without considerable difficulty). The local Samaritans, unfortunately, think Nehemiah is building the walls to keep them out and are understandably none too pleased. While opposition from the Samaritans' quarter is not unexpected, the prevailing attitude within Nehemiah's own community is more surprising. The returnees are, not only, suspicious of a Jewish governor working for the Persians, but have very little patience for what they

think are Nehemiah's narrow-minded objectives. They are a rather demoralized bunch. They, too, once had high hopes when they first arrived in the land, but their dreams of Jerusalem's past glories have fizzled with the harsh light of day. The wreckage of their city lies all around them, and with it the heart of their life together as a community. They see the task of rebuilding as insurmountable. The persistent nagging of the nay-saying critics don't help either. A local Ammonite, even goes so far as to imply that any wall Nehemiah builds will likely fall to pieces the first time a fox stubs his toe against it. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that when Nehemiah isn't cajoling construction crews or arguing with the royal court over the need for more funds, he is cheerleading the local population.

Despite the numerous troubles and setbacks, the governor somehow manages to get the walls back into working order. While they are not as glorious as the walls from Solomon's hey day, they are nonetheless, a point of pride and protection. For the first time, in almost a hundred years, the people of Israel will sleep with a sense of security. Nehemiah, whether intending it or not, helps the returnees to regain confidence in who they are as a people. He pulls them together politically. And yet, despite Nehemiah's nearly heroic actions, we are reminded that a people can not live on bread alone, anymore, than they can live behind walls, even rebuilt ones, for such walls can and do betray. Rather, a people must live on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Now, here we have a problem! For Israel has not only forgotten the words of God, they have also forgotten who they are as a community of the Word. To not know who you are means you have no hope of knowing where you have come from, much less where you are going. The harsh circumstances of life have left them a morose, untrusting community of lotus-eaters lost in their own despair and forgetfulness. But something truly wondrous happens, whether it is from the hope that Nehemiah brings, or from the simple fact that they start looking each other in the eyes again, we will never know. But the community begins to remember, to lay aside their carefully cultivated amnesia. They may not know much about the "words of the Lord" but they sense, at least, that such words may hold their story, the story of who they are, the story that was robbed from them.. So they shout, as a community, for the scribe Ezra to bring out the book of the law of Moses.

Ezra, who has been trying to reform the people's spiritual life for the past thirteen years, is undoubtedly taken aback. His numerous attempts to reach their hearts having met with little success. In fact, he spends most of the book that bears his name tearing his clothes and sitting appalled at the people's knack for forgetting who God is. The shouting crowds, however, unexpectedly rouse him from his latest ash heap of despair. They want him to read and preach. They want to hear the word of God. Though they have never bothered to listen to him before, Ezra opens the book and begins to do exactly as they have asked. They stand together for six hours in the October sun as the "words of the Lord" fly from Ezra's mouth and nest in the people's ears. We are not sure what Ezra read, but we can guess that he probably spent considerable time remembering for them. He remembers their slavery in Egypt, the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. He remembers Moses and Sinai, the wanderings in the wilderness, Abraham and Sarah, Ruth and Boaz, the promises to David and those dreams of Joseph that so enraged

Joseph's brothers. He remembers all the pivotal moments and as he pulls together each of these various threads and weaves for the people a tapestry of who they are, he also remembers them into the story, lifting up their lives and hopes and dreams into the telling. While they may see themselves as a people fractured and broken, a people dismembered, that is not ultimately their destiny, that is not the end for which they have been created. When Ezra finishes, the people begin to cry. Tears stream down their faces. Tears of sorrow and shame, of grief held too long. Tears of joy and thankfulness for a love that always loved them. Tears that speak of where they have come from, and where they should go next. Tears at the sheer wonder and beauty of words whose very speaking creates new worlds and new horizons inside their hearts. They stand confronted by the God of scripture; confronted by judgment and grace, mercy and forgiveness, commandment and obedience. They encounter all the frightening possibilities and crucifying demands of a life remembered before God and by God. They see themselves, some for the first time, as a community that exists solely as a result of God's actions, a community which has its being in God's creative and redeeming work. In such a realization as this, there is celebration, a sense of family, of kingdom coming, of the year of the Lord's favor. The Church, too, shares in this realization, in this reality. We hear Nehemiah's words "Eat the fat and drink the Sweet wine" "Celebrate!" Rejoice? "Feast" "but don't forget those for whom nothing is prepared." For as we all know, or should know, a celebration is not a celebration until the captives are indeed released, and the blind are given sight. A feast is not a feast until the oppressed are given freedom and the forgotten ones "for whom nothing is prepared" are included. Should we fail to include them, should we forget them, then we forget who we are as a community, who we are called to be as church and, even worse than that, we forget the one who offers us his own choice fat and wine-colored blood. The one, who even now rolls up the synagogue scroll and speaks words, to us, both of identity as well as command. "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" he tells us. May it always be so.