

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

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

This week is the state of the union speech. Elected officials give speeches all the time, but this is the big one. Teachers and parents give speeches also. As a pastor I give speeches also, but we call them sermons. And with all these people talking at people, in front of others I wonder how effective is it? I mean each week we read the lessons from scripture and then you all listen to me talk at you for around 15 to 20 minutes and I wonder what you get out of it? Do the words of scripture affect you at all? Oh yeah, you smile at the jokes and like the stories that I tell once in a while, but what is the long term effect on you. Has it changed you at all?

When was the last time the Word of God made you cry? When was the last time the Word of God made you change your lifestyle. When was the last time the Word of God made you anxious, challenged you, made you hopeful, made you angry, made you think? Sometimes I wonder, I wonder if it matters at all to anyone what I say up here in regards to the Word of God because I wonder if we truly feel the Word of God in our lives?

How's your excitement level right now? Are you energized about being here at worship today to hear the word of God and to listen to this sermon? Well....???

Our reading from Nehemiah recalls a time when the worship life of the believers was filled with a passion, an excitement, a thirst and a hunger, these were moments that changed lives. These people will filled with a enthusiasm that drove people to weep and cry, a zeal that drove people to anger and resentment. They heard the word of God with a great passion.

The reading from Nehemiah comes to us after the Jews have returned from decades in captivity in Babylon. They had been slaves with no rights, they couldn't worship like the wished, they couldn't have their religious writings, or times for worship, they were captive slaves, without rights, without freedoms. And for years they hadn't worshipped or read from the Torah, the laws of Moses as their foreparents did. All that they remembered of their faith came from stories handed down to them from grandparents who remembered the temple of God, the great Jerusalem, and the Words of the Torah.

The book of Nehemiah starts with the remnant of Israel returning home. They come back to a country that is destroyed, homes and farms are burnt out long ago. Cities are just shadows of their former selves. And Jerusalem and the Temple of Solomon have been utterly destroyed. So Nehemiah the leader of people, sets about rebuilding their homeland, He directs the people to rebuild the walls of their capital city, Jerusalem. They rebuild the temple and the city itself. But that

is not all that is on his mind, he also wants the people to rebuild their faith and dedication to God.

By the time of our reading the reconstruction is over and the scrolls of the Laws have been rediscovered. And the people turn to Ezra the High Priest of the newly reconstructed temple and plead with him, beg him, ask him to come and read the scrolls to them. Imagine a large mob of all men and women and children old enough to understand (I guess the rest went to the nursery) all coming together in the city streets moving as one and asking as one that they demand to hear the Word of God. For decades they had not unrolled a scroll and read from it, they had not heard the Word of God directly. And so now for the first time in their lives they were going to hear directly the Word of God. They definitely had a thirst and hunger for God's Word.

And so Ezra stood before them on a high wooden platform built for just this purpose to read the word to the people. In other words Ezra was in the pulpit. We know this from vs. 4, not included in our Lectionary reading for today. And he is standing there, surrounded by 13 other elders. Then Ezra unrolled the scroll. And all the people stood up out of respect for the very word of God, they stood at its reading. We still do this today at the Gospel reading as a sign of respect and honor due to God and the Gospel Good News.

And then the text tells us that the people stood, all men and women from early morning to midday being "attentive to the Book of the Law." You know I've heard a lot of jokes about the length of a pastor's sermon, but imagine these people, they stood from early morning, 7:00 to midday, 12:00 listening carefully to every word that was spoken from the Law of Moses. And that is not all. The next day the elders and tribal leaders come again to Ezra and again want to hear more from the Law of Moses. And again for a second day they read the Word of God. And in that reading they re-discover the festival of booths, a tradition of living in booths made of palms, shelters of makeshift travel, to remind them of the times of Moses and celebrate the victory over their oppressors. And so the elders declare right then and there that this festival shall be celebrated again. And so for seven days according to the end of chapter 8, the people worshipped and heard the reading of the Law read to them day in and day out until the eighth day, when there was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance. Imagine listening to the reading of the word for hours at a time, standing the entire time, day in and day out for seven days. That is passion for the Word of God.

When was the last time you can say the Word of God has touched you so deeply? Today it seems people have become almost indifferent to the Word of God. We live in an information overload age. We have newspapers, TV, internet, libraries, books, magazines, everywhere you look there is stuff to read and learn and know. So much so that people just simply are overloaded with information. But not these people. They were hungry because they had not heard it, or seen

it, didn't have the option to read it at home or watch a TV preacher talk about it. They were excited to finally hear that Word for the first time and worship God.

How have we lost that passion today? Think about the last time the word of God moved you to feel, hope, pain, guilt, fear, joy. When was the last time the Word of God was alive in you?

If it hasn't been for a while, perhaps it is time to ask yourself why not. The word of God is being fulfilled in your hearing. We need to dwell in the word, to take part in Bible studies, to pray about it and read the word of God. To be open to hearing God's truth for our lives and to be moved by it. Yes we read little snippets each week, but when have you sat down in prayer time devoted an hour or even a half hour to dwelling in the Word of God? A people that had lost it, been taken away from it, couldn't wait to hear the power of God's word once again, they rose as one and heard in glory the word anew. We have bibles a plenty, books, commentaries, devotionals, radio, tv, internet, all with options to help us learn more and yet we struggle to find the time to hear God's word. Perhaps it is time we recommit to living in the Word of God. The Word of God is alive, it has something to say to us each and every day.

This is the day of the Lord, the word of God has been fulfilled and continues to be fulfilled in our presence. Let us open ourselves to hearing God in our lives, in prayer and devotion, and in the Word revealed through scripture. It can change us, lift us up, and grant us hope. Be open to God's word and feel the power of God in your life this day. Amen.

May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come. AMEN.

Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus, and for all people according to their needs.

Almighty God, you have given us the gift of your Holy Spirit, to fill us with your fire and to make us your witnesses of your glorious Word. Open up your Word to us this day, fulfill it once again in our hearing, burn it into our hearts and minds filling us with the passion of your Spirit. Lift us up in knowing you more deeply and with an ever growing conviction to do what you would have us do.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, Hear our Prayer..

O Heavenly Father, we ask that you bless us with the mind of Christ so that we may be his partners in welcoming others into your life of grace and forgiveness. In a world of violence and war, we need your blessing of peace. In a world filled with hatred and envy and guilt, we need your forgiveness. In a world filled with disasters both manmade and natural where so many are suffering we need you to tend to us and keep us. Lord Bless us this day with your Love, grace, forgiveness and peace.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, Hear our Prayer.

God, stretch out your saving hand to those who are sick. With your strong love, comfort the lonely, the oppressed, and all who suffer. Give courage to those facing surgery. Give healing to those who are afflicted. Give peace to those troubled both physically and mentally. Impart your Holy Comforter to be with them in their times of need. Especially Howell Crawford, Crissie Redding Myers, Dan and Pam Keeney, Jim and Kim Bevins, Pat Good and all those we name now in our prayers to you....

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, hear our prayer.

Lord, we pray for this community of faithful; teach us to use the many gifts you have given us for the common mission of your Church. Take and use us as your witnesses, as your servants in this community and beyond to spread your word, to share your good news, renew us once again in our baptismal vows as your children, made new in your grace. Lift up all your people gathered here reaffirming our faith and challenging us to new possibilities in service towards you and your kingdom. Grant us the power of your spirit to lead us in life and guide us always in your ways.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, hear our prayer.

Into your hands, o Lord we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.