



VILLAGE
CHURCH
Presbyterian (USA)

Scripture & Proclamation

SCRIPTURE:
Nehemiah 8:
1-12

April 28, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

After the Babylonians conquered Judea and destroyed the temple in 586 BCE and took many of the Jews with them to Babylon, 70 years later, the Persians conquered the Babylonians and freed the Jews to return to their homeland. The temple in Jerusalem has been rebuilt under the leadership of the priest Ezra. Then 60 years after that, Nehemiah, governor of Judea, completes the building of the wall around the city to protect the people. That's where we are for today's reading.

Everyone gathers—women and men from the whole nation. Children are there, too. Ezra gets up on a wooden platform—that's the origin of the pulpit. He opens the scrolls and reads from early morning until midday. He reads for six hours. There are two sets of 13 names listed in today's reading. The first set are lay people who are on either side of Ezra and scholars believe they are named because they helped Ezra read during those six hours. That's where we get the practice of a lay reader every Sunday. He reads from the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew scripture. From Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

When he starts reading, those who are sitting stand up. We don't do that but other traditions do. Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Episcopalians all stand for the gospel reading. As they are listening, they lift their hands up in the air in praise to God.

Several years ago I was with a group of students from Columbia Seminary. We were in Merida, Mexico, visiting churches to learn more about what it means to be a Christian there. We visited a Pentecostal church and the pastor urged us to raise our hands up to the Lord so I raised my hands. Next to me was my co-leader, Dr. Erskine Clarke, who taught church history. Erskine was standing with his hands barely up to his chest. I said to Erskine, "Professor, we're

supposed to raise our hands to the Lord!" Erskine looked at me and said, "Professor, I am lifelong Presbyterian from South Carolina. This is as high as my hands will go."

Jewish hands apparently went higher. Then they bowed and said "Amen, amen." The double Amens mean the people are emphatic, even passionate, about hearing the word proclaimed.

The late Rev. Dr. Gardner Taylor is considered by many to be one of the greatest of American preachers of the 20th century. He pastored the Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn and preached more than 4,000 sermons in his lifetime. Dr. Taylor created a taxonomy, a ranking, of the responses to the preacher in the Black church. He said there are five levels. The lowest is "Well." When you're preaching and you hear someone say, "Well," they're telling you they are here and they are waiting for a word from the Lord but so far, not a lot is happening. The next response up is, "Yes, uh huh." That means you are starting to go somewhere and they are going with you but they are still not sure. Then there is, "Go on! Get it!" which means the word is there you and just need to pick it up; reach harder. Number two is, "Amen." That means they hear you and are with you and a double Amen (like Ezra got) is even better. Dr. Taylor says the more Amens the better. The pinnacle of responses? Number one? That's when they are on their feet and waving their hands and they say, "Glory Hallelujah!" Dr. Taylor says the preacher should just sit down because it is not going to get any better than that and the more you talk, the more likely it is that you will mess everything up.

The people are standing and waving their hands and saying, "Amen, amen!" Then they bow as they hear the word of God and some put themselves prostrate on the ground so humbled, so in awe were they, to hear the word of God.

Then Ezra has another list of 13, all Levites—these are the teachers. During these six hours, they moved around the crowd helping people understand the word they were hearing so that they could understand. And the scripture says the people wept as they heard the word of the Lord. They were so moved to hear and understand the word of God that they stood and cried.

We are in this sermon series titled, “The Ways We Worship.” We’re exploring key elements in our worship service. We started off looking at the Call to Worship, then the confession of sin and assurance of pardon, then last week hymns and songs and today, scripture and proclamation.

As Presbyterians, we are part of the Christian tradition that emphasizes the sermon in our worship. For our Roman Catholic and Orthodox and Episcopalian and Christian Church Disciples of Christ and most Lutheran churches, the focal point of worship is the Lord’s Supper. For Pentecostals, it’s prayer time. For us and for Methodists and Baptists and the United Church of Christ and most nondenominational churches, we tend to focus on the proclamation of the word through the sermon.

Like the reading in Nehemiah, every sermon I preach starts with scripture. That’s the difference between a sermon and a lecture, talk or keynote speech. The sermon is always focused on the Bible passage. So the work of the preacher is to study and work over the biblical text. That means I work on the Greek from the New Testament and the Hebrew from the Old Testament. Then I work over different English translations and I read a number of commentaries, articles and books written by Bible scholars about the particular passage about which I will be preaching. Throughout it all, I am praying. “Lord, let the words of my mouth and meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” That comes from Psalm 19:14.

It all starts with scripture. So my usual pattern once the scripture is read, is to do what I just did, to work with you through the passage so that we might come to an understanding. A couple of you have asked me why I do that because, after all, we just heard it read. But just like Ezra and the Levites, the scripture is not always clear to of us and I hope my explanations increase our understanding.

I am what is called a narrative preacher. That’s one school (or style) of preaching. There are several styles of preaching. Narrative means I use the form of the story from the biblical text—or my own stories or stories about others—to preach. Jesus did that. He told stories, often in the form of parables (a story with a meaning), to teach about God.

There are other styles of preaching. Another common style is didactic preaching. That’s when the preacher shares three or four points in the sermon. That’s not a bad style. It gives you a framework to take away. I’ve tried that. And you may hear me do that again. The last time I did that I was preaching in Shreveport, Louisiana. I did my work with the Bible passage and then I said I had three points. I gave the first one and then the third one and completely skipped the second one that was in my manuscript.

After worship I greeted people and they thanked me for coming and said, “I think you forgot number two.” Years earlier I would have beaten myself up about that but by then I had the wisdom to know that the Holy Spirit was at work. I guess the Spirit didn’t think much of the second point so the Spirit said, “You know, let’s not do point number two.”

Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence is the senior professor of preaching at Columbia Seminary and a good friend. She teaches the introductory course in preaching and usually during the first class, she tells the story of when she was a guest preacher and after worship, an earnest woman came up to her and thanked her for the sermon and told her she loved the story about the red wagon—that it was exactly what she needed to hear that day. Then Anna tells the class that she didn’t tell any story about a red wagon. When she asks the class to explain this, some said the woman was likely delusional or perhaps she heard that story somewhere else and wrongly attributed it to Anna. Then Anna pauses and smiles and says, “Or perhaps the Holy Spirit knew what she needed and gave her the red wagon through me and I didn’t even know it.”

Professor Carter Florence has a point. It’s less about me as the preacher and more about the faithfulness of the Holy Spirit. I am counting on that every Sunday. Some of you notice that every Sunday I join hands with the other pastor who is leading worship and our lay scripture reader and Dr. Josh Maize

and I pray, “Lord, remove anything from inside of us that might hinder your Spirit in any way from gifting to your people whatever it is they need from you this day.” By God’s grace and through God’s mercies. That’s proclamation.

They had participated in the rebuilding of the temple. And then they resurrected the walls of Jeru-

salem. And they all gathered—women and men and children—to hear the reading of scripture. And they stood up and lifted their arms and bowed and said, “Amen, amen!” and they wept. They cried because by the grace of God they heard and understood.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.