



The Most Fascinating People: Mattithiah

TEXT
Nehemiah 8:1–12

August 23, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

All summer we have paid attention to people — people we can only know through the testimony of scripture. We have paid attention to Mary and that long-haired Samson. We walked with Onesimus and learned what trust looks like; and James, who taught us to watch our tongue. Joseph of Arimathea would not give up on God’s kingdom no matter what, and Naaman realized that no one makes it without grace.

And today, there is a list of names. They are Mattithiah and Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah for starters.

It’s an odd subject for a sermon because I know nothing about them. All I know is that they were there, standing with Ezra on that day when all the people pleaded with Ezra the priest to read the Torah.

This is the day when most scholars suggest modern Judaism was born.¹

Let me give you some history, just briefly. The story of Ancient Israel involved a period called the Exile. Israel had been conquered, and the leaders of Israel were marched into captivity in Babylon. They languished there for a generation until they

were allowed to return home to Israel. When they returned, Ezra and Nehemiah were their leaders. So in this text, Babylon is in their rearview mirror. Exile is behind them. They are back home. The great testing is over. Jerusalem was rebuilt. The wall of the city was rebuilt.

But there were still questions. How does one practice the faith in this new day? How does one live faithfully to God in a new time?

They found their answer. All the people, it says, called on Ezra the priest to read for them from the Book of Moses — the Torah. And Ezra, standing on a box “made for the purpose” (this seems to be the first pulpit) read from early in the morning until midday, and everyone listened intently. Biblical historian John Bright says, from this moment on, Israel was a people defined not by statehood, ethnicity nor even temple worship, but rather as those claimed and committed to the Torah of Moses.² From this moment on, Jews would be people of the book.

We are told all the people were there. That included Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub. Also, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Azariah, Jozabad. They were Levites. The Levites served

as interpreters. They were helping people understand the meaning of the Torah. One scholar says this is when the “sermon” was born.³

You may regret this moment in biblical history which gives birth to the sermon. But there it is. We see that *understanding* Torah is the first step to *standing under* Torah. And it is standing under Torah that Judaism lives now — which I think is why we know these names.

This passage is so important it has its own day in Jewish worship. It is called Simkhat Torah. Several years ago, I attended a Jewish service of Simkhat Torah. Some of you went with me. I was not prepared.

They read the end of Deuteronomy, the last few verses of Torah which tell of the death of Moses, and then as soon as they come to the end of Torah, they immediately read Genesis 1:1, beginning the cycle again. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin describes this day as “delight at having completed the study of God’s word, and joy at the opportunity to start studying His words again.”⁴ They read the Torah scroll and then unrolled the entire scroll end to end. And then they danced the Torah around the congregation. They unrolled the

entire scroll; men, women and children danced it around the circumference of the congregation. This went on for twenty or thirty minutes with singing and dancing. I stood there rather amazed. Jews do joy better than Presbyterians do.

When Ezra reads Torah, it is a remarkable moment in the history of Israel. But do you know what I find most interesting in this passage? What I find really important is the names. The writer goes into great detail to tell us who was there. But they are names of people we know nothing about. Why would scripture insert a collection of names that no one knows?

It's no accident, I think. The point is this: The transformative power of the Bible is known only through real people with names. The Christian faith never shows up in abstract; it only shows up when it is lived by ordinary people. Some of them we know, but most of them we do not. But all of them had names and faces.

From the beginning, this story of faith has been about people. Back in Genesis, we read of the call of Abraham. Abraham is the father of Judaism. It says that God and Abraham looked up at the stars, and God promised Abraham, "You will have descendants as many as the stars in the sky."

I think about that first night when God and Abraham looked at the stars together. I wonder if they began to dream of their names, names like Isaac and Jacob. There would be Rebecca and, soon enough, a great leader named Moses; and his sister

Miriam, who would teach them to dance on the free side of the Red Sea.

There must have been a star named David, for in time David would be a king like no other. And there had to be a star for a prophet named Jeremiah, who would weep for his people. There was Ezra the great priest, but also a star for Mattithiah and Shema and Uriah and Hilkihah. I know nothing about them, except that this story can't be told without them.

My point is this: The word of God, the transforming power of Torah, is always witnessed in people. The scripture could have said there was a crowd, but instead it says among them were Jeshua, Hodiah, Azaraiah and Hanan. Does it matter that we know these names? It's instructive. It demonstrates that God's work in this world is not just through the giants.

The story of God's work of redemption in this world is a long list of names. Most of them are known to only a few — and to God.

There are some giants. We all know the giants. There was Martin Luther King. He showed us what a modern day prophet looks like. There was Oscar Romero, who stood up for the poor against oppression in El Salvador. There was Mother Teresa, who was tireless in a ministry of compassion, and Deitrich Bonhoeffer, who was fearless in the face of Nazi Socialism. I could go on; you could too.

And of course there was Dr. Bob. He's a giant. He built this church from zero. I remember my first visit with him. We met

at Panera. We got a bowl of soup and "talked church," as we say in my family. I wanted to know how he did what he did. I knew I was visiting with a giant.

When I asked him how this happened, do you know what he told me? He said it was you. He mentioned a long list of names, many of whom I would learn over time. Some I would never know, as they were already gone. But what became clear is that I was standing on the shoulders of those who had gone before, and even if I didn't know their names, God did.

That's the way it is with what God does in this world.

Ezra read the book. Everyone knows Ezra; he was the great priest. But you should also know that standing there with him were Mattithiah, Shema and Anaiah. Uriah and Hilkihah stood at Ezra's right hand. On his left hand were Pediah and Mishael and Hashbadanah. And Zechariah. Oh, not Zechariah the prophet, nor Zechariah the father of John the Baptist. This is a Zechariah we know nothing about, but somehow the story can't be told in its fullness unless we know that Zechariah was there on Ezra's left.

Somehow their presence must have been inspirational to whoever it was that wrote this moment down. That's the way it is with the gospel.

Sometimes there are giants. And we know them. We tell the story of faith by their names, Peter and Andrew and Mary. There would be Thomas the doubting one. Later would come a thinker named Irenaeus, and another named Augustine. Martin Luther

and John Calvin would offer their testimony of grace. If God and Abraham did give names to the stars that early night, no doubt stars would include their names. The stars would also hold the names of Sojourner and Dietrich, the other Martin Luther. There was Oscar from El Salvador; and William Sloane from Yale; and Margaret Towner, the first woman Presbyterian preacher; and there is a bright star named Dr. Bob.

The story of the faith is littered with the names of giants, but these giants are a minority. Most of the time the gospel lives in people who never make the papers.

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran pastor and national speaker who has more tattoos than hair. She writes honestly, although she is very comfortable using language so profane she might get kicked out of the Navy.

She grew up in a Church of Christ. They were folks who taught her early that as a girl, she was not equipped to be a pastor. Women didn't do that. Women could teach children, but when the boys became middle-school age, well, men needed to take over the teaching then. Everyone knows that women are to be silent in church. She learned that early.

After a long and often destructive road, she began to wonder if, even contrary to the church of her childhood, God wasn't calling her to ministry.

She tells of the time she went home to tell her Church of Christ parents that she thought she was supposed to be a pastor. She says

she stammered it out, and her father stood up and went to the shelf and took down the Bible. She said, "I thought, here we go. He is going to hit me with the scripture stick." But when he read, he didn't read from Paul, who said women should keep silent in the church. He read from Esther, a woman who had been a leader among God's people. And he read, "Perhaps you were born for such a time as this." She said then they embraced me, prayed for me and gave me a blessing, the kind of blessing one never forgets.⁵

Lots of people these days know the name Nadia Bolz-Weber. But there are very few who know the name of her father. But you can't tell the story of her ministry without telling his story and the blessing he chose to give, the grace he chose to speak when his daughter was searching for what God was really up to in her life.

I suppose what I am saying is that in the future, people of faith are still going to tell the stories of the faith, which means in time they are going to get around to our names. They will no doubt tell stories of spiritual giants. We all do.

They will remember the stories of Abraham, who named the stars. He gave them names like Isaac and Jacob and Rachel; names like Moses and Deborah and the shepherd king David; names like Mary and Peter, James and John. But the names don't stop with the ones we know in scripture. There was Augustine and Calvin and Martin Luther King. There was Mother Teresa,

who showed us how to see the human in everyone, and Jimmy Carter, who looks like he will show us how to face death. There is Nadia, and there is Dr. Bob.

But not only the giants. There is Mattithiah and Hilkiah and Akkub and Hashbaddanah. I can't tell you anything about them, except that the story of what God is doing in this world isn't complete without them — which means it isn't complete without you.

You are the only one who can be Christian with your life. Let this book live in you, and I promise there will be those who come who just can't tell the story of what God is doing in this world without mentioning your name. That's a promise.

¹Walter Brueggemann. *Theology of the Old Testament* (1997), p. 446

²John Bright. *A History of Israel*, p. 392

³James D. Newsome, et al. *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year C* (1994), p. 114

⁴Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. *Jewish Literacy* (2001), p. 641

⁵Nadia Bolz-Weber. *Pastrix* (2013), pp. 17–18

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.