

Rejoicing in the Rubble

Nehemiah 8:13-18

Okay, so a bunch of Old Testament Jews decided to celebrate a festival prescribed by the Law of Moses. But we're Christians. We know that in one way or another, Jesus fulfilled all those laws. We know that Jesus was the One to Whom all those ceremonies pointed. We've seen the reality, so why should we study the shadows? What can we possibly learn from the people in this passage?

Well in the first place, and perhaps most obviously, this passage shows us how seriously these people took God's Word. Last week, when we looked at the first part of this chapter, we saw how all the people of God gathered in Jerusalem and clamored for Ezra to read to them from the Law of God. We saw how everyone who was old enough to understand the Scriptures stood in a city square, listening to the reading of the Bible with rapt attention for an entire morning.

And today's passage shows that their interest had not slackened with the coming of a new day, as the leaders of all the households gathered for yet more intensive Bible study. The people weren't willing to let only their religious leaders, the priests and the Levites, know about God's Word. No, they wanted all the heads of families to know what the Bible said so that they could then go back home and teach the rest of the people everything they had learned.

But they also weren't satisfied with mere head-knowledge of the Scriptures. No, when they read that they were supposed to celebrate a week-long festival later that month, they instantly made preparations to do just that. In other words, they weren't just determined to hear the words of Scripture – they made every effort to put God's Word into practice in their lives.

Well, what about us? We Presbyterians have long prided ourselves on being people who take the Scriptures seriously. That's why we go to such extraordinary lengths to make sure our preachers know what the Bible says, even requiring them to know some Hebrew and Greek. That's why over the years we have started so many schools and colleges all over this country, and around the world. And that's a big part of the reason we come to Sunday School and worship every week – so we can learn more of God's Word.

So, the question for us is this: are we as willing as the folks were in today's passage to put what we have learned into practice? No, we aren't obligated to observe the Feast of Tabernacles, or any part of the ceremonial law anymore. But there are an awful lot of other things Jesus Himself commanded. Don't even look at other people lustfully. Don't even be angry with other people without seeking reconciliation. Turn the other cheek when someone strikes you and let them hit you again. Give to those who ask of you, expecting nothing in return. Love your enemies and pray for them. And all that's just in Matthew chapter 5.

Now, we've heard all that before. But are we eager to put what we know of God's Word into practice? If not, maybe we can learn something from these Old Testament people who rejoiced as they busied themselves about building shanties made of sticks. Maybe there's something in the meaning of the Feast of Tabernacles that can help us recover the wonder, the joy that comes not just from knowing God's Word, but from living according to it.

So, why did the people rejoice during the Feast of Tabernacles? What did this celebration mean to them? I suppose most obviously it pointed to God's provision for them. After all, it was also called the Feast of Ingathering, because it was held after all the year's crops had come in. Much like our own Thanksgiving feast, the people put aside their daily concerns to gather with family and friends,

celebrating how God had blessed their flocks and herds, how God had given them a bountiful harvest. Of course, they feasted for a whole week, which sounds like a great idea to me!

But what did living in those shanties made of sticks have to do with being grateful for God's provision? Well, when God described this festival in Leviticus chapter 23, he told the people to live in tabernacles, or booths made from branches, for a whole week. This was to help them remember how they had camped out after God had brought them out of Egypt and before God led them into the Promised Land. In other words, even while they were celebrating all that God had given them in the present, they were never to lose sight of the fact that God had also provided for them during their wilderness wanderings, the tough times in their past.

And such remembrance would have had special meaning for the people of Nehemiah's generation. After all, they had a lot to celebrate. God had brought them back from exile into the Promised Land. God had even allowed them to complete the walls around Jerusalem. But at the same time, they had a long way to go before they could really consider themselves prosperous and settled. After all, most of them had to build their shanties in the open squares of Jerusalem precisely because most of the houses in the city were still in ruins. In fact, as they looked around at all the people who had gathered for the feast, they couldn't help but notice that they were a tiny group indeed, rattling around in a city that was much too large for their reduced number and status. And yet, they rejoiced among the rubble, so certain were they that God would continue to provide for them.

Well, what about us? Maybe one of the reasons we aren't as enthusiastic about reading God's Word and living it out is that we've lost sight of the lesson of the Tabernacles – we've lost sight of God's promise to provide for us in good times as well as bad. For it's all too easy for us to focus on what we don't have isn't it? Our health isn't what it used to be. Our culture is falling apart, as leaders from the President to the Pope are coming under increasing criticism. And the population of this area isn't anywhere close to what it was in the days when small farms filled up the landscape and every railroad stop had a lively small town around it. How can we be grateful when we are still so needy? How can we rejoice among the rubble, the way God's people did in today's passage?

Perhaps we need to move on to the second great reason the people rejoiced during the Feast of Tabernacles. For if they rejoiced because of God's provision for them, they also rejoiced because of God's protection of them. And again, the people of Nehemiah's time had no problem understanding this. Of course, they knew the history of God had protected His people during the time of their wilderness wanderings after the Exodus from Egypt. They knew the old stories about how God had stood between their ancestors and Pharaoh's army in a pillar of cloud and fire, and then parted the Red Sea so that they could escape from the Egyptians. But they also had a personal story to tell. They could tell of how God had protected their own generation during their period of exile in Babylon, and how He had brought them safely back to the Promised Land. And they could point to how God had allowed them to reconstruct the walls around Jerusalem, in the face of enemies who quite literally surrounded them.

But at the same time, living in shanties made of branches for a week reminded them of how vulnerable they continued to be. Such rude huts would provide no meaningful shelter against the elements, however unlikely a shower might have been during that season. Moreover, once the feast was over, their living conditions wouldn't be measurably improved – remember, most of the houses in Jerusalem remained in ruins. And the people who lived in the villages outside the city walls would continue to be vulnerable to the depredations of their enemies – the same people who had spent the last few months trying to prevent them from rebuilding those walls.

Oh, and they were also painfully aware that they continued to live under the authority of the King of Persia, a pagan tyrant. They had no army, no military strength of their own and so they continued to be, in a very real sense, slaves within their own land, having no real freedom or autonomy. And yet, helpless as they were in the eyes of the world, they rejoiced among the rubble, so certain were they not only of God's provision, but also of God's protection.

Well, what about us? Again, perhaps the reason we aren't so interested in applying God's Word to our lives, perhaps the reason we find it hard to rejoice in the midst of our own difficulties is that we are no more convinced of God's protection of us than we are of God's provision for us. No, unlike so many of our Christian brothers and sisters overseas, we don't have to worry about government persecution. But we can't shake the feeling that our cultural foundations are shifting under us, and that Christian morals and values just aren't as respected as they used to be.

Moreover, we've been to far too many funerals recently, haven't we? Each of them reminds us of the unpleasant fact that none of us are promised tomorrow. And so as the years go by, as our health changes, it's far too easy to sympathize with those vulnerable Old Testament people, huddling in their huts. And yet in spite of their own sense of vulnerability, in spite of their own weakness, they could rejoice in those shanties. They could rejoice among the rubble. How could they do that?

Perhaps, even in the face of their relative poverty and weakness they could rejoice in God's provision and protection because of the third great lesson of the Feast of Tabernacles – they rejoiced in God's presence among them. For think about where verse 16 says they were camping out – in the courts of the House of God, and in the open areas that were probably close to the Temple. In other words, they rejoiced because they got to spend a whole week living next door to God's House. They rejoiced because they got to be close to God, the One they trusted to provide for them, the One they trusted to protect them, the One Whose Word they rejoiced to learn and to share with one another.

And so we modern-day Christians have come full circle, back to the place where we began this study. For we understand that Jesus is the One Who fulfills all the ceremonies and sacrifices of the Old Testament. And that means that in the coming of Jesus, we get to enjoy every day what the people of Nehemiah's time only got to do once a year – to live in the very presence of God. For what did John tell us in our responsive reading? Jesus, the eternal Word of God, became flesh and dwelt among us – and in the Greek that word "dwelt" literally means tabernacled, or tented among us, not just once a year, but all year long.

And why is that such good news? In Jesus, God revealed Himself and His glory to us, dying on the cross to provide our greatest need, His love, His forgiveness and His grace. And as He rose from the dead, Jesus protected us from our worst enemies – from sin and death itself – by promising eternal life for all who would simply trust in Him.

That's the great story that the whole Bible teaches, the story of Jesus. So, why shouldn't we long to learn more about Him? Why shouldn't we long to obey such a magnanimous Lord? Why shouldn't we be confident in His provision and His protection? And why shouldn't we rejoice, even in the midst of the rubble, the mess we have all made of our lives, of our world? For in His Holy Spirit, Jesus hasn't just come to live next door to us once a year. No, He has come to live within all who trust in Him.