

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

It was a new day when all the people gathered as one man before the Water Gate in Jerusalem. But not just a new day; it was a new month, a new beginning, a new chapter in life. The old chapter had been severe for them. They had been living in captivity. But God had mercy on them. He returned them to their homeland. But it was in shambles. Jerusalem lay in ruins. Its gates burned by fire, its walls destroyed. There was no protection from their enemies.

But God sent Nehemiah. And he led the people in rebuilding the walls and putting up new gates. By the grace of God this took just fifty-two days. They finished on the twenty-fifth day of the sixth month. And they rejoiced.

And now on the first day of the seventh month, which corresponds to our month of October, they come together to hear the Word of the Lord. The Book of the Law is read; most likely Deuteronomy. And as it's read not one, not two, not even many, but all the people weep. They mourn upon hearing the Law of God. They grieve within their hearts, for they acknowledge that they have sinned against the great God.

Compare this to the people gathered in Nazareth. They, too, are attentive when the Word of God is read. But here is where the comparison ends. For they do not weep and mourn over their sins. Instead, they have anger in their hearts. They rise up as one man to oppose the preacher. They attempt to throw Jesus off the cliff.

We see two extremes from our Old Testament reading to our Gospel reading. Why so different? Perhaps this is partly why... The people gathered at the Water Gate had just been delivered from their enemies. The captivity had been long. The struggle real. They had no one to lean on and cling to except the Lord. In Nazareth life was good. Not perfect, but they were not living in bondage. Their enemies were not making threats against them. And their posture is very different. Pride instead of humility. "How dare you say that to me!" instead of faces bowed to the ground.

Which of these two extremes describes you and me? Somewhere in the middle? I pray not. For then the words of the Lord have no effect on us at all. We're apathetic, not hot nor cold, but lukewarm.

The temptation for us is to raise our heads up and not bow them to the ground. To have pride in ourself. But such pride destroys faith. Pride and faith cannot long coexist in the same heart. And so in Nazareth the people have no use for the good news; no need for words of forgiveness. They have pride and not faith. But at the Water Gate all the people weep. They have no pride. Pride keeps us from seeing our own sins. They are not proud but sorrowful, and so they clearly see their sins against God.

We should be disturbed, even frightened, if we see nothing wrong with judging our neighbor and not ourself. For that is a symptom of a proud heart; a heart like that of the people of Nazareth.

Repent. Words of grace and forgiveness are here. But you and I will care little for such words if we do not repent; if we are proud. We must gather like all those at the Water Gate. Whatever chapter in your life you are currently living, it's time to begin a new chapter. We need a new beginning just as they did.

And that new beginning is here now for you. The first day of the seventh month was called the Feast of Trumpets. It was a day holy to the Lord. His people had sinned. But God forgave them. Was this because they wept, and mourned, and grieved? No. "*Do not mourn or weep,*" they were told. "Your tears cannot cause God to forgive you because in His heart He already has."

I realize that this day for us is not the first day of the seventh month. For us it is not the Feast of Trumpets. But for God it is. The trumpets herald the good news. The feast is spread out for you on the altar today. The herald trumpets forth the word to you that God is for you; and He gives Himself to you in the feast, to be for you, forgiveness for all your sins. That last chapter in your life...the page is turned today. It is a new chapter, a new month, a new beginning for you and me.

"*The joy of the Lord is your strength.*" These words were proclaimed to the people at the Water Gate. Whose joy...theirs? No. God's joy over them. Our joy comes and goes, it rises and falls. But God's joy is always the same.

How can He have joy over us? We are not holy. We are sinful. When a parent has to deal with a dirty, stinking diaper, this is not a joyful experience. But that little child still remains the parent's joy. God does not rejoice when you and I sin against Him. But you always remain His joy. And nothing can change that. For you are His child in Christ through Holy Baptism.

You are not holy, but baptism is. In baptism God declares you holy for Jesus' sake. These cleansing waters daily wash us of the stinking filth which covers us and clings to us. It has this cleansing power because Jesus put it there. He entered baptism to go to the cross. And so your sin and mine clung to Him. "*He became sin,*" writes St. Paul. Whenever you return to your baptism it's a new chapter in life, a new beginning. "*If anyone is in Christ,*" says Paul, "*he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold the new has come.*"

So open your ears. Do you hear them? Listen to the trumpets. Their note is one of pure joy. God forgives you. You are His joy. And so have joy in your heart. "*Eat the fat and drink sweet wine.*" The fat of Jesus' body; the sweet wine of His blood. The new chapter in life begins today for you. And Christ your Lord and Savior fills every page. Amen.