

“FEASTING ON GOD’S WORD”

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

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. ²Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁵And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁸So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

⁹And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

In announcing the Family Fun Night Sunday before last, Nancy, quite untypically, got carried away and announced that there would be offered Bible Jeopardy, Bible Bingo...and Bible pizza. Of course we all wondered what in heaven’s name Bible pizza might be, and some of you still may not know. But I’ve figured it out. Since most breads in the Bible are unleavened, it’s likely not one of those rising crust pizzas, and since the Bible has no clue what a tomato is (they didn’t get out of South America till the 1500s), it must be made with white sauce – oil and milk and flour and garlic abound in the scriptures. Since cheese is mentioned only three times in the Bible, don’t expect much on your Bible pizza. And, of course, the Bible doesn’t know of pepperoni or sausage but there are lots of fish in the Bible. So by deduction we conclude that the Bible pizza is a thin crust, white sauce pizza with 3 dollops of cheese and lots of anchovies. We sure hope the families enjoyed their Bible pizza on Family Fun Night!

The thought of dining on the scriptures may seem bizarre, but it not so for Ezekiel. He was commanded by the Lord, or “the likeness of the glory of the Lord” to be exact, to take a scroll of scripture and eat it, so as better to proclaim God’s word to the house of Israel. I guess we’re better able to convey to others literature we’ve digested, metaphorically, or in Ezekiel’s case, literally. Our Psalm today speaks of God’s Word, the Torah, God’s Law, as something more valuable than gold, but also a treasure sweet as honey to the taste, like sweet drippings from the honeycomb. Umm, scripture on a powder milk biscuit sounds better than even Bible pizza!

The Hebrews have been allowed to return from exile to restore Judah and rebuild Jerusalem after a half century of living in a strange land. The year is 538 or so, B.C. Ezra, the scribe and priest, and Nehemiah, a governor, preside over a people trying to rebuild their city and, for many, their faith. The walls must be built to fortify Jerusalem, a new temple erected where the once great temple of Solomon’s now lay in ruins. And while many had been able to adapt their faith to the new Babylonian reality while in exile, many others, once separated from the Holy center of faith in Jerusalem, the City of Zion, neglected their faith and failed to nurture spiritual roots in the Torah, God’s Law. When the Hebrews returned home, like many homecomings, rather than

harmony and happiness, there was much dissention, bickering, and fragmentation. Enemies attack from the outside, while within disagreements: who's in, who's out...who should govern..., how to secure peace...how to rebuild the temple. Some saw the new temple and said Yeal-others, remembering the glory of the old temple, said, "No way!" But they knew something vital was missing...something that could lead them back to their true identity, their spiritual center...something to fill the emptiness within and the great void right there in the middle of the people of God.

Over my years of ministry, people have asked me from time to time "How to read the Bible?" If God's Word is the Bread of Life, as the old hymn has it, we best come with hungry hearts, not over-stuffed with things that fill us up but do not satisfy, the pursuits that claim large amounts of our time and energy and perhaps bring recognition, but do little to promote the common good or strengthen God's kingdom; pleasures that distract and entertain, which we all need a bit of, but over which we can too easily obsess and make a centerpiece of life; promises of self-help or self-improvement which prove to fill us with false hopes and eventually the poison of cynicism about most all things. There are so many menus from which to choose that clamor to capture our vulnerability and promise to feed and fill us up with what we need.

Sometimes, we have to be intentional in cultivating a hungry heart – reflecting on our life and discerning what is our deepest need as we approach the scriptures...and other times the troubling, driving circumstances of life preempt our spiritual agenda and leave us longing for something that can satisfy, that can feed these uncalled-for hungers. In confusion, we hunger for guidance; in despair, hope; in fear, assurance; in brokenness, healing; in lethargy, challenge; in dissention, reconciliation; in sin, forgiveness.

Because the returned exiles were hungry for something they knew had once been their best food, they told Ezra, scribe and priest, to go fetch the book of the law of Moses; and in their hunger, they gathered in the square before the Water Gate. And he read...and he read, from early morning to midday to a large audience of hungry souls, including women as well as men and possibly even children who were old enough to understand. A large, inclusive company of eager listeners (a preacher's dream!). "The ears of the people were attentive to the book of the law."

How to read the scriptures? Oh, go read them alone in your home, but know that the true context for hearing and understanding God's Word is *in community*...the people gathered, as we are at this moment. The Spirit is with us in our alone times, but the Holy Spirit abounds and dances among us when God's people are together, for the Bible is the Book of all the people. And the Spirit is what brings the words from these ancient documents off the page and makes them a living word, God's Word; otherwise the Bible would be just good words.

Here was a community of listeners, taking in every word, empty souls being filled with a nourishing food.

But wait, it wasn't just the words of the Torah read out loud to empty hearts. There was another essential gift – the gift of interpretation. Now on one level, the interpretation was probably from the old Hebrew, with which the people were little familiar, to Aramaic, the variety of Hebrew they knew, and which Jesus spoke centuries later. But more than that, the writer says that "They (Ezra, along with Nehemiah and the Levites) read from the book...with interpretation" and "*they gave the sense*, so that people understood the reading." In other words, they connected scripture to life circumstance; beyond speaking the exact words, they gave the meaning for this particular people. Interpretation is always an aspect of reading or hearing God's word; while in this story

the interpretation seems to be “top down,” we call upon the strength of community in understanding God’s words, in the Reformation tradition of being “priests to one another,” while always seeking the wisdom and insight of the learned among us. Without the gift of interpretation, literalism is enthroned as the mode of receiving God’s word, and the Bible becomes a wooden, one-dimensional, historical document rather than a living word. We get mired in the rigid orthodoxy of the past and we miss the truth embedded in the sermon of John Robinson, pastor to the Pilgrims in Leyden, Holland, as they set off for the new world: “The Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word.”

What comes of hearing God’s Word in community, with hungry hearts, and faithful interpretation of the meaning? It could be, initially, profound sadness, for while it is the food that satisfies, God’s Word is also a plumbline, and in it we see how far out of plumb we may be with that Word. That may be one explanation of the reaction of those gathered at the Water Gate: “All the people wept when they heard the words of the law.” For many in exile, other words than Torah had informed and begun shaping their lives. Now they heard afresh what God asked and expected of them, as well as God’s promises to them. And in the light of such magnificent promises, such rich blessings, their glaring underperformance may have hit home like a ton of bricks. “We’ve forgotten the Law...we’ve pursued lesser loyalties...we’ve forgotten who we are.” No wonder there was weeping. And part of it too may have been hearing the fullness and wholeness of God’s Law smack in the midst of their broken, fractured community, struggling to find its way now that it was back home.” That may be our hunger at times: seeing in God’s Word what we have failed to fully become, we stand convicted. That is what happened to the Church at the time of the Reformation. In a church that at the time was being corrupted by aspiring to the manners and modes of the affluent culture and the ruling powers around it there were men and women of faith who reread the scripture, and saw in God’s Word how far the church was straying from its identity, its purpose, its calling in Christ. The church in every age always needs to be looking back in order to move ahead faithfully...back to the Word to be continually reforming itself as the Body of Christ in its unique time and place. That reforming, renewing process can bring tears, when the magnitude of the yawning gap between our call and our condition is realized – as individuals...as a faith community. And I think that’s what happened that day by the Water Gate.

But Nehemiah is quick to move the people beyond their tears, for ultimately God’s word is not given to nurture guilt or deepen sadness, but to liberate and bring joy. Rather than seeing divine instruction as cramping, restrictive legislation that burdens the heart, Nehemiah is inviting the people to know that the Law is a compassionate guide, a beneficial pathway, a set of wise instructions about how to live together in justice and joy. “No tears!” says Nehemiah, “but feasting! God’s Word is a feast” Don’t wallow in guilt or be paralyzed by regret, but “Go...eat the fat and drink the sweet wine...” Now we may choose to go a bit easy on the fat, and might prefer a drier wine, but Nehemiah’s point is clear, “Do not mourn or weep,” for the Word is liberating, energizing, and joyful. And remember, Nehemiah, adds, true joy is always joy shared, never just a matter of self-indulgence: “Go your way, eat...and drink...and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; share the blessing with those whose tables are not as laden with bounty. Today that can mean sharing our bountiful table with the people of Haiti by giving generously of our money to send the kind of food they need: water, protein, medicines and medical supplies, doctors, shelter, heavy equipment. Yes, there is enough sadness and horror in the world to prompt an ocean of tears, but it is the feast of God’s Word that tunes our hearts to the music of compassion and caring; amid it all, “the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

How to approach the scriptures? I suggest, in light of Nehemiah's call to the people, that a good image to have in mind when we open up the Word of God is that suggested by the movie many of us saw some years ago, *Babette's Feast*.¹ It's a story about food and feasting becoming the gateway to redemption and reconciliation, as Valerie Davis describes it. "Set late in the 19th century Denmark, the movie describes the culinary artistic extravagance of a woman exiled because of war from her beloved France. When given a chance to return home because of a lottery winning, she instead prepares a feast. The meal, meant to celebrate the 100-year memory of a now-dead founding pastor, represents an extravagance that borders on sin. But Babette knows, as does...Nehemiah, that food and drink appreciated and relished may be the best witness to grace. After hearing the word and understanding it, what more is there to holiness but to enjoy the life God has given"¹ and to share that feast with those "for whom nothing is prepared." Amen.

¹ Valerie Bridgeman Davis, in *Feasting on the Word* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), p.271.