
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Six Hour Torah Concert: Who's In?

A Sermon by

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

January 24, 2010

The first house that Ted and I bought was a little two bedroom house on a quiet cul-de-sac near Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, about two miles from the church we served. It was 1984. Our first daughter had been born and with the down payment in hand from my parents, we qualified for a mortgage loan with 13 percent interest, plus points, and were delighted to refinance about two years later when the interest rate had dropped to 8 percent!

It was the saddest house on the street. On the outside, the paint was peeling, the porch was sagging, and the back yard was rampantly overgrown. The inside was not much better. A 1940s icebox, 1940s linoleum, 1940s worn carpet: you get the picture.

We came to learn about the sadness of the house. The builder of all the houses on the street started on that property, 22 Vassar View Road. He built for himself and his wife and young daughter a garage with an apartment over it, where they lived, and beside that a two-seater outhouse (which was still standing when we bought the house). He then built all the other houses on the street, probably about 20 houses, built his family's real house last, and soon thereafter, left his family, never to be seen again. His wife and daughter lived in the house those 40 years; I can only imagine their eking out an existence, certainly not doing any home repair in all those years. The daughter had grown up and moved away, and when her mother died, a church member alerted us that maybe she would be willing to sell it to such a fine young couple as we were. Slowly over the seven years we lived there, we transformed the house and the property, adding on a bedroom and a passive solar living room, discovering hardwood floors beneath the worn carpet, redoing the kitchen, tearing down the outhouse, planting a garden, and so on. Seven years, two babies, full time work, and with apologies to the dental profession, there were times when I would rather have had a root canal than face another day under home renovation.

So take my seven years in that house and multiply it by twenty times of reconstruction and you begin to get the picture in Nehemiah's words. The Book of Nehemiah and the Book of Ezra before it are probably among the least read books of the Bible so let me give you a down and dirty history.

About 1000 BC, David becomes King of Israel. He conquers Jerusalem and declares it the capital of his kingdom. Despite its chronic water shortage, its unsuitable strategic location and remoteness from trade routes, Jerusalem becomes the political and spiritual center of the nation. David brings the Ark of the Covenant to the highest point, Mount Moriah, and although he does not build a temple, his son Solomon begins the building of the Temple where people can bring their sacrifices and come to for their spiritual pilgrimages. The Kingdom is united, north and south, but only for two generations and by 722 BC the northern Kingdom is conquered by the Assyrians. Jerusalem and the southern Kingdom survive until 586 BC when Nebuchadnezzar, King of the Babylonians, captures Jerusalem, torches the Temple and carries the people off into exile.

Fifty years later, a small number of Jews return to Jerusalem when the Persians overthrow the Babylonians. Another 80 years-100 years later, this Nehemiah, cup bearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia, hears how his people are still suffering in Jerusalem and can he go back and help them?

What have they been doing for the past hundred years? Imagine coming back to your homeland. A four month trek across the desert, filled with looters and bandits. If you make it back safely, your house is torn down. You have to eat so you start your farm, plants and livestock all over. You need

water and shelter and clothes and pots and dishes. You need safety and protection. There are neighbors to help, children to be born.

It is as unimaginable to us as Haiti is today.

Last Sunday evening I visited with the Haitian congregation. Who would have guessed, three weeks ago, when we opened our doors to them, these Haitian's lives would be devastated by an earthquake in their homeland? I spoke with Pastor Joseph and his musician Kesnel and both told me of their losses. Their houses are destroyed. Kesnel's wife and son are sleeping outside. They have broken bones and other injuries. Families are still waiting by the phone to hear a word of hope. When I greeted the congregation, I told them of our prayers and support, that literally help is already there as Church World Service through our One Great Hour of Sharing offerings are already flowing in with money, relief kits, funds for medicines and supplies for area clinics provided by Interchurch Medical Assistance, and other Global Ministry partners, like House of Hope, an orphanage about 40 miles north of Port-au-Prince that was only slightly damaged but the children and workers were unhurt. House of Hope is sending their supplies of medicine, food, water and people into Port-au-Prince. The only way I can continue to listen to the reports and watch the relief effort images is to know that WE are there, my money, my church, people reaching out in compassion on my behalf. Rev. Susan Sanders, our United Church of Christ minister for global sharing of resources said, "The church responds immediately at times of natural disasters, and its commitment to recovery and rebuilding is long term. The United Church of Christ will be working in Haiti for many years to come, long after the media spotlight has turned elsewhere."¹

What brought me joy was sitting with that congregation, listening to them sing out songs of praise to God in a Creole language I could not understand, knowing, but never fully knowing, the fullness of their losses: family and friends and country and culture. Yet they sang and lifted their hands, tears of joy and sadness.

Could those be the same tears of joy and sadness that Nehemiah and Ezra see? For years they have been helping their people rebuild their lives and then their Temple, and somewhere amidst all the ruins they find a very old scroll, their beloved Torah, words they had not heard in a very long time, maybe generations. They stand up on a table, Ezra unrolls the Scroll, people hold his arms up and from morning to midday, for six hours, they read their story. It has to be translated and explained so they could understand it. And they weep and they rejoice and they raise their hands and say Amen, Amen, and they have a party.

Whether is it rebuilding a house, or an island nation, or a community of faith, or your own life, what do you do?

I look out and I see people who have lost their jobs, are about to lose the ACHCCCS health care if budget cuts are implemented. I see people who have lost loved ones, are praying for themselves and

¹ http://www.ucc.org/news/strong-response-uccs-online.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+UnitedChurchOfChrist+%28United+Church+of+Christ%29

others who have serious health issues. I see people who thought they had all the money in the world they would need, and then realized life was more than that money.

I look out and I see people, amidst all the rubble of their lives, get up on a Sunday morning (or get out on a Saturday night), drive past numerous other churches, risk that they may not know anyone or that they might not fit in, dare to find a place to sit next to virtual strangers, and dare even further to sing in public words and music they may have never heard before. I look out and see a people, a church, a community of faith, which opens its hearts and bank accounts, to others, making a statement over and over again, just like Nehemiah and Ezra did, “The Lord is my strength.” The Lord, Adonai, Elohim, YHWH, Holy One, Giver of life and conqueror of death. This is the one who is my strength. This is the one that reminds me that life is stronger than death.

That Hope is stronger than memory.

That Change and destruction will not win over compassion and joy. We all have choices and making those choices is the question of life and death.

A Cherokee elder said to a young child, “There is a fight going on inside me, a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil, full of anger, sorrow, envy, greed, regret, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority and ego. The other is good, full of joy, peace, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. This same fight goes on inside every person.” The child thought for a moment and then asked, ‘which wolf will win?’ The elder simply said, ‘the one you feed.’²

To all those who will feed the spirit of the second wolf, you are welcome here.

Amen.

² Cherokee children’s story