

Sunday July 26, 2020

Lesson 8: Forgiving, Merciful, Compassionate

Scripture: Nehemiah 9:9-17, 32-33

**Context:**

We move to another book in the Old Testament also written during the exile, the book of Nehemiah. Like the book of Daniel, we will get a glimpse into the world of exile and how the leading Jews interacted with those who had invaded and uprooted their country. The book also helps us understand how God was working in the lives of those who were trying to make sense of the exile and find hope in the midst of such a time.

The setting of Nehemiah comes during the Persian control of the region. Scholars date the period to around the mid-fifth century, after the rebuilding of the Temple and a trickle of those who had been exiled had returned to Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> There would be prophets and leaders needed to help restore the city and the Temple. Thus, we meet Ezra and Nehemiah.

Ezra and Nehemiah have always been paired together. In the Hebrew Bible, they form one unit and even early Christian traditions had placed them as one book.<sup>2</sup> Later, they became separate books in the Christian tradition as it was difficult to reconcile conflicting evidence of chronological events. The books also function more as biographies, giving an account of the individual's lives and their mission instead of giving a timeline of events.

As Ezra, an individual from a priestly family, went to Jerusalem to help with religious life, Nehemiah went to lead with the reconstruction of the city. Nehemiah had been the king's cupbearer and begged to return to Jerusalem to rebuild it. When he arrived, he was horrorstruck at the city's defenses being in ruins.

Nehemiah began to reconstruct the city as the official governor of the territory. Immediately he faced opposition from internal forces such as prophets and other city officials alongside the protests of leaders of neighboring provinces.<sup>3</sup> Yet Nehemiah persevered and foiled their efforts to rebuild the city and its walls.

One might wonder why the Persian Empire would allow them rebuild the city walls. A look at a map reveals how important Jerusalem was as a stronghold especially as

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<sup>1</sup>Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 424.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 426.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 428.

neighboring Egypt faced revolts encouraged by Persia's rival Athens.<sup>4</sup> Jerusalem was a valuable place for Persia to hold.

Today's text is a reflection of how they got to this point in the rebuilding. It is a public confession and a prayer as the reforms continue. As the people acknowledge their history, they are reminded God will be with them once again on their journey.

### **Application**

I would imagine the words attributed to the book of Nehemiah were written as a way not only to name the past, but to also remind the people of how past actions continued to sneak into their present. Just as God's chosen people had come out of exile and hope looked to be on the horizon, there was still work to be done. As provided by the commentary in the context piece, Nehemiah had an uphill battle to fight between outside forces clamoring to stop them and internal forces who once again wanted to whine and complain. God would grant them a new beginning and yet a new beginning also meant they had to reconcile their past to not repeat in the future.

I would imagine there would be a similar prayer or history we could write when it comes to our individual and communal lives as Christians. We could probably very much name many times where God acted in our lives and the times we received the nudging of the Holy Spirit. We could do it in our collective history and our individual history.

We can remember the stories of the early church and how the book of Acts names how the Lordship of Christ was spreading through Asia Minor with minor bumps along the way. We can look to the times the church stepped up to the plate and helped feed the hungry like St. Francis of Assisi or Mother Teresa motivating groups of people. Our story includes those who impacted social reform in their communities by being advocates of justice.

We feel God when we recite the Affirmation of Faith when our world is collapsing. We remember crying to God about a situation and then the next day or month we see an unspoken prayer answered. We feel the breathlessness of watching a child baptized in the faith and then watching them grow up in the church. Those are the powerful moments where we perhaps feel God the strongest.

What should also probably be just as important is all the times God has been faithful even when we turned away from God. We've abused Christianity to use it as a tool to invade other countries and then say we "were just trying to give them Jesus" as we plunder their land as seen in the western hemisphere's history. We've seen men use scripture passages out of context to justify dismissing women from church leadership. And our history is fraught with examples of race discrimination globally in different ways. Even in our treachery, God still claims us.

Our individual lives are just as fraught with infractions. There's the year when we choose to go on multiple vacations without tithing a dime, and God is still there for us. At times we are not cruel to our neighbor; instead, we ignore them. We have all had our moments when we knew we were doing something wrong even though no one saw it, and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 429.

God still chooses to give us mercy and compassion.

God, unlike us, is a wonderful promise keeper. God is always faithful to humanity in spite of the messes and havoc we create out of our own accord. Even as we turn away time and time again, God continues to save people. God has a good grasp on the fact that we will mess things up and God still continues to upkeep God's end of the covenant.

As the text today demonstrates, God continues to be forgiving, merciful, and compassionate. Even as humanity continues to make the same mistakes and forgets all the gifts God has given us, God still delivers us even though we have done nothing to earn that deliverance. Going before the account of the Exodus, God made a covenant with Abraham claiming his descendants for better or worse. This covenant includes not just the people of Nehemiah's day, but those of us living today.

Why do you think God is so forgiving, merciful, and compassionate? Why is important to name in our history, both communally and individually, all the seasons where God has been faithful? How can we pray for God to lead us faithfully?

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