

“The Joy of the Lord”

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

January 24, 2010

The end of our first lesson this morning provides the phrasing for part of a popular Christian song ‘the joy of the lord is my strength’. It is a beautiful line and a sentiment that I hope that we can cling to as a truth that shapes our understanding of the world and the experiences that we have in life. The joy of the lord is my strength! The joy that comes from knowing the good news of the Gospel and the power of God gives me strength to face anything and everything that the world might dish out in my direction. And we really do need that strength in our lives.

We need the strength that God can provide But too often we just do not hear the Word that can give us joy.

It is a stunning situation that we read about in our Old Testament text. The people of God have return from exile - enslaved under the power of a foreign nation. They come back to the rubble of what once had been their home ... A city that lay in ruins - walls torn down - even their beloved temple destroyed. They have been forced from their homes and stripped of their possessions. Even their religious rituals and deeply held beliefs have been taken from them as they have not been able to gather as God’s people to worship in the temple. Now, having been allowed to return to their devastated home, they gather in the open air and the priest calls for the scroll containing the word of God. There in a public gathering that word of God is read out loud and the people are able to hear again that old and familiar story of a God who had created the world - a God who had called their ancestor Abraham and made promises to him - a God who had heard the cries of His people enslaved in Egypt and brought them out with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. For the first time in generations the people were able to gather in public worship and hear these, their stories - God’s story. And they wept! They wept over all that they had lost. They wept over all of the brokenness in their lives. They wept simply because they were able to hear the word of God once again.

Remember, the people are told, the joy that is our in the love and power of God is the strength that will carry us forward at this time.

It seems to be such a powerful reminder for all of us in our day as well. It seems as though we have become so lax in gathering to hear this Word of God - it is so freely available to us - so familiar - yet, in it’s availability and it’s familiarity we do not see a need to gather to hear it and gather strength from it. In fact it is discounted as unimportant and almost laughed at in our world. I have been thinking a lot about one comment that I heard on news reports concerning the disaster in Haiti. After reporting what I consider to be very inappropriate comments by religious leaders like Pat Robertson that condemned the Haitian people for a pact with the Devil and the earthquake being God’s just punishment, one person talked about a person who had come to help in Haiti who was both a medical doctor and a priest. The comment that was made was simply that Haiti needed doctors a whole lot more than they needed a priest. There is no question about the importance and need for doctors, nurses, rescue personal, construction workers and the like. All have critical ministries and missions to perform. Yet the tone of voice seemed to imply to me that not only should this be obvious to everyone how important doctors are in the situation

but more importantly we just don't have any need of that religious stuff that a priest or pastor might bring.

Is there really any need for this religious stuff in our world - a world that is often filled with pain and disasters of all kinds? Do we just need doctors and rescue workers - perhaps some police and military to maintain order - and construction workers and equipment to rebuild later. Is there a place for the Word of God in this world?

It is a strange and often difficult world in which we live? I was really interested to hear another news report this past week which revealed something that I did not know. I was not aware that at least some of the rifle scopes used by the US military [and military forces around the world] had a Bible reference imprinted on them. The coded inscriptions are stamped on the side of scopes mounted on M16A4 and M4 service rifles, and referenced biblical passages through abbreviations such as "2COR4:6", a reference to Second Corinthians 4:6 of the New Testament: "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." I was amazed to read about this even though I suspect that many would not even notice the letters and numbers - many perhaps would identify it as just a serial or model number. But now there is concern about that religious reference because some believe that it violates the military policy of not trying to convert people from other religions. So now the company is discontinuing the practice of stamping the rifles scopes with the Biblical reference and providing kits to remove the lettering from scopes that have it.

It is a strange world we live in. And perhaps a rifle scope is not the best place to point to the love of God. But somehow, somewhere the word of God needs to be proclaimed. I would go so far as to suggest that the proclamation of the word of God is critical for our world.

The people of Israel wept when they heard it again. They needed to hear those words that pointed them to the love of God that had always carried them tough times - a word that reminded them of a God who had rescued them and restored them. I think of the report of one woman who was rescued from under the rubble of a collapsed building in Port-a-Prince, Haiti - reporters asked how she could have survived - and she talked about faith and a loving God. I think of the many ways in which the Word of God has been darkened in these days of despair in Haiti and yet how often we have heard ordinary people on the streets talk about the love of God. And I think of our friend Richard Sandness whom we have so recently entrusted into the hands of God for eternal life - Richard, who wanted it clear that his funeral should not be a time to talk about him but a time to speak the good news of the Gospel.

In those dark moments of our lives - we need the hopefulness and joy of the Lord. We need to proclaim this Word of God. We need to hear it spoken over and over again so that what we hope to be true becomes so ingrained in our beliefs that it is available to us when the darkness threatens to over shadow us. The good news of freedom and release does come to fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Have you heard it? Do you know it? Do you believe it? Will you proclaim it?

AMEN