

Welcome

Good morning everybody - my name is Ashley and i'm a part of the teaching team here at Catalyst. Today I'd like to start by telling you guys about the time that fabric softener broke me.

Now, for you to truly understand how such a simple thing could break such a strong, independent person such as myself, you have to understand the larger setting of the story. I was in Greece for 6 weeks, which is just long enough that you can't fake it until you make it.

My housemate and I were going to meet some friends at the bus stop and bring them up to our house. The bus stop was about a mile from the house, but it also happened to be right next to the grocery store. So, we made the plan that he would wait outside at the bus stop for our friends and I'd run in and get some stuff from the store while we were waiting.

The first thing that went wrong was about 5 minutes before we were going to leave, it starting pouring down rain. And, of course, nobody thought to pack an umbrella of all things. So, we put on our jackets and head down the mountain to the bus stop/grocery store.

So, we get there, I go into the store and my housemate stays outside. Shopping isn't easy in another language. Some of the stuff I need is easy - a couple of avocados to go with dinner, some bread, but then I had to get laundry detergent.

The second thing that went wrong was there was an ENTIRE aisle of detergent, which was overwhelming. And the third thing that went wrong was that none of them look like the one that we had in our house already. I'm trying to be quick because I have people waiting in the rain.

The fourth thing that went wrong was that I couldn't translate the words. So, I ended up picking the one that I had logically deduced (convinced myself) had to be the right one. It was the most colorful and it was shaped like the one we had at the house.

So, I rush to the check out - which ends up being a mess, but then after 20 minutes in the store I rush back out and then the fifth thing goes wrong - my housemate is there... by himself. So, I asked him where our friends are and he said they haven't shown up but 2 buses have already come and gone. After waiting for the next bus, we decide we have to go back to the house to try to call them.

So, after a not-so-successful trip, we get back to the house and talk with our housemates about it. One of them starts dinner and one of them starts laundry. A few minutes later, my housemate comes back to me and says, "um... this isn't laundry detergent." and I said, "what do you mean?" and she said, "this is laundry conditioner."

And that was the last straw. I just break down. Full on, chest heaving, face red, ugly crying. All that stress for nothing. I just wanted to go home. I was tired of not being able to do basic things

like buy laundry detergent. I just wanted everything to be back to normal where i knew what to do when I went into a grocery store, or met up with friends.

And I've had that same feeling again with COVID - a feeling which I'm sure some of you share. I want to "go home" to pre-covid where I knew what I could expect when I walked into a grocery store or met up with friends. It regularly feels like I'm far from home, trying to make my way in a very different place, when everything feels like it's fighting against me.

Today we're going to talk about those feelings, and I hope you'll discover as I did when preparing this that this worship space *is* our home. It's our safe space, even when the world is turbulent. So, as we prepare to worship this morning, I urge you to be present with us. Be healed by this worship set. Be safe in this space. Let's worship together.

Message

Welcome to the season of Epiphany! This time in the church year, we ask who God is. Who is this one who came to us on Christmas?

This year, our series is called Deep Breaths. We're at the beginning of 2022, almost two full years into the COVID-19 pandemic. We're all tired. We're all wondering how many more variants we'll have to deal with, how much longer until we can relax a little.

The idea of doing more right now is exhausting. So we're not doing. We're resting - resting in who God is.

In both Greek and Hebrew, the same word means both 'breath' and 'spirit'. So as we breathe deeply here at the beginning of the year, we're also pausing to make space for God's Spirit to fill us.

Given the last couple of years, we could use some comfort, some of God's presence. And we all want to know: When is this going to be over?

We began 2 weeks ago not with a call to ignore our pain and questions, but with an assurance that God sees us, hears us and loves us. Then last week we discussed how important it is to name our pain.

This week we are going to discuss what a strong faith in a crisis looks like. And honestly, having a strong faith in the midst of this pandemic is not something that I've excelled at. I repeatedly have felt like, "why can't this go back to the way it used to be" or "just one more week/month/break/variant/etc and then we'll start getting back to normal" and then we just... Don't.

Similar to the feeling in Greece - we want/hope/wish we will be back to normal soon, but truthfully, I realize there really isn't any going back to the way things used to be. So, the end is actually this unknown new beginning. And with that change, it's been difficult for me to have a strong faith. When is the hard part going to be over? What is the new normal going to look like? There's too many unknowns in the day to day to feel settled and that's been a big struggle with my faith in the midst of this.

This is a feeling I'm sure those who were exiled felt regularly. Everything is different - everything has changed. Everything is harder than it was before. For generations they lived like that and I often wonder how they continued to have a strong faith.

We'll be looking at **Nehemiah 8** today, which actually takes place after the exile. Nehemiah is the man who led the exiles to return home. He's the guy who had to navigate all those complex realities we talked about last week, with the exiles returning merging with the group of people who stayed. He's leading the group who was so excited to return to their homeland after 70 years and then finally get back and everything is... just okay.

Nehemiah tells the story of how they worked to recreate home. The first major project they did was to rebuild the wall around the city so that they can be protected and grow. Any city of any size had a wall in the ancient world. It was how the government protected its citizens and made sure they had space to grow.

The fact that Jerusalem - the capital city - had gone almost a century with no wall was a massive source of embarrassment to God's people. Our passage today takes place just after they've finished rebuilding the wall around the city, which ought to be a joyous occasion. I mean, they've finally come *home* after 70 long years and they've accomplished the first good thing in their home. This is concrete evidence God is with them.

So given that, I found the people's reaction surprising. Let's read:

All the people assembled with a unified purpose at the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had given for Israel to obey.

So on October 8, Ezra the priest brought the Book of the Law before the assembly, which included the men and women and all the children old enough to understand. He faced the square just inside the Water Gate from early morning until noon and read aloud to everyone who could understand. All the people listened closely to the Book of the Law.

Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform that had been made for the occasion. To his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah. To his left stood Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam. Ezra stood on the platform in full view of all the people. When they saw him open the book, they all rose to their feet.

Then Ezra praised the Lord, the great God, and all the people chanted, “Amen! Amen!” as they lifted their hands. Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah—then instructed the people in the Law while everyone remained in their places. They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were interpreting for the people said to them, “Don’t mourn or weep on such a day as this! For today is a sacred day before the Lord your God.” For the people had all been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. - Nehemiah 8:1-9

When presented with the word of God, the people wept.

Isn’t that *weird*? They just finished the wall. They’ve gathered to celebrate that God is with them. God has brought them back from Exile and God is healing their people and they’re gathered to hear the Torah read, to mark that God is with them, that they’re God’s people and...

And they *weep*?

Here’s why - in this passage, the Torah is what’s read to the people. This is essentially what we understand to be the first 5 books of the Bible. And, the Torah can be boiled down to this essential idea found in **Exodus 19:5** -

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’

God calls God’s people to be a Kingdom of Priests for a hurting world, so that the world might have a relationship with God.

And, when presented with that, the exiles weep and mourn - either because they realize that they aren’t participating in that call, or because they’re so focused on themselves and not what God is doing that they weep for their shortcomings. So, they weep.

And you know, I definitely understand that. I know I’m not the person I wish I could be or that I know God wants me to be. Especially right now because everything is harder BEFORE you add on the emotional turmoil of a pandemic, the interpersonal strife with politics the way they are, and the financial stresses of “am I going to lose my job any day now?”

But Nehemiah tells them - don’t weep. And, if I’m honest, when I first read this text, I literally skipped those whole last two verses where Nehemiah says don’t weep or mourn. Mostly

because this comes up a lot in the Bible and it annoys me because if I need to cry, then hi, I'm going to cry. And not even the Bible is going to tell me not to.

But as JR actually made me read it and I looked into it more, I realized that the people are weeping right now, which is a reasonable response to their situation. BUT what Nehemiah is saying is that this gathering is intended as a space apart from the woes of the world.

Nehemiah knows his people and he's not simply saying "don't cry - be happy." He's actually addressing them to say, "you're dealing with a great grief and a lot of hard work - this space is intended as one to allow you to be healed, not for you to feel guilty or shameful."

Did you hear that? This worship space isn't supposed to be a space for guilt and shame. This is a space for us to heal and grow into the people God calls us to be.

So are churches supposed to be a place where anything goes, so long as you show up? If we're not supposed to weep, then does that mean God doesn't care about our sin? Does that mean we just come together and sing Kum By Yah?

So, no, of course that's wrong. If we are called to be a Kingdom of Priests and God invites us into this space to be healed and to be formed into that, so that we might show the world the way towards God. If you notice, we open each week with a call to worship - an invitation to be here in this space and not still "in the world." And we end every gathering with a blessing - a recognition that we're going to leave this space and go back out into a world that is hurting. We even practice bringing this healing and peace into the world when we "pass the peace."

This is why we don't say something like, "your vax status doesn't matter. We just love one another here." Or, "Hey, you're a xenophobic racist? Whatever... join us!" We don't do that because this is a space where we are formed into a people that show the world who God is. We cannot do that if we are not a place people can come to be bodily and emotionally safe, cared for, and loved.

In other words, this is a space for transformation. For healing.

That's why Nehemiah tells us not to weep. Not that we shouldn't express our feelings, or that we shouldn't mourn the bad things, but that there is a bigger picture and we get to be a part of it. The Judeans are back from exile. That is over. They're home. Even though they still have problems, the wall is finished. The first step is done. God is creating spaces for them to grow into the Kingdom of Priests God is calling them to.

I don't know how you entered into this space today. Maybe you came looking for healing. Maybe you came burdened with shame and guilt. Can you imagine today that God is not finished with you? Can you imagine that, maybe, God is just getting started? Can you practice believing that with me while we sing another song?

MUSIC BREAK

After telling the people not to weep, Nehemiah goes on to say:

“Go and celebrate with a feast of rich foods and sweet drinks, and share gifts of food with people who have nothing prepared. This is a sacred day before our Lord. Don’t be dejected and sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength!” - Nehemiah 8:10

Nehemiah is saying that we should be celebrating the larger picture of God, because that reframes our current struggles. This is a place where we can learn from our African counterparts. Throughout the 1960s, when African nations were overthrowing their colonial oppressors, they drew from Liberation theology.

Liberation theology is grounded in the story of the Exodus from Egypt. Just as God overthrew Pharaoh and liberated the people, so too would God overthrow their colonizers and liberate them.

But in the wake of liberation, African Christians faced a problem: where do we go when liberation has been achieved? What is our theological framework when Pharaoh has been cast down? Kenyan theologian Jesse Mugambi says reconstruction theology is the answer. This is what he says:

“Theologically, the conversion experiences of Moses, Nehemiah, and Paul are very instructive for the processes of Liberation and Reconstruction. Moses reconstructs the collective consciousness of his people, and gives them courage to defy Pharaoh and proceed into the wilderness. In a similar manner, Nehemiah reconstructs the collective consciousness of the disenfranchised people, and gives them hope to rebuild their society.”

Mugambi tells us that in order to move forward and to begin rebuilding, we need to reframe our understanding of who we are - into one of reconstruction. This reconstruction is the larger picture of God’s movement in the world. The hope for rebuilding is what Nehemiah is calling us to celebrate.

In a world divided - between Exiles and those who remained, between liberals and conservatives, between races - Nehemiah calls us to join together in God’s work.

God has chosen God’s people. In every place we find ourselves - oppressed, corrupted, exiled, rebuilding, and even in a pandemic. God is still moving and choosing US. Every time. God’s ability to change us is better than our sins and failures. Isn’t that worth celebrating?

Nehemiah is not telling us to ignore our problems and pretend everything is fine. He’s saying when we enter this space, we focus on what God is actively doing and what God is moving us towards. In order for us to show the world the way to God, we have to be able to see God and where God is moving.

This is a space where God invites us so we can be as that Kingdom of Priests to go out into a hurting world and create little spaces where others might find rest in the larger picture as well.

Communion

We celebrate by coming to the communion table. Jesus shared this meal with his followers, inviting them to follow him to the Cross. They didn't - they still had a lot of growing to do. After his resurrection, Jesus shared the meal with them again. And they shared it every time they worshiped together. Because they understood that this is a space Jesus created for us - to celebrate Jesus' death for us. To grow into his example.

Before we come to the table, I'm going to lead you in a prayer of examine. I'm going to offer you four questions to reflect on prayerfully. Then I'll pray for all of us.

When in the last week did I experience God's invitation to heal and grow?

When in the last week did I focus on fear, anger or shame instead of God's love for me?

When in the next week might I be tempted to focus on fear, anger or shame?

How can I rest in God's love for me?

Prayer

God, you have gathered us today that we might be healed. Thank you for welcoming us as we are so that you can shape us into the people you created and call us to be. We confess that, like our spiritual ancestors, we often come before you in a spirit of fear or shame. We see only how we don't measure up to your call. Thank you for reminding us again today that your invitation has nothing to do with our performance and everything to do with your great love for us.

As we come to your table now, bringing whatever elements we have been able to gather, we pray they would be a spiritual food for us. As we receive them, may we also receive your infinite love and remember it is the source of our transformation. Thank you for making us your people. We offer these prayers and receive this meal now in the name of your son, Jesus.