

"They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading."

Reading from the Old Testament: Nehemiah 8:1-10

Reading from the New Testament: Mark 13:1-2

What makes a nation a nation? Is it a flag? A defined border? A monarch? A structure of governance? A system of laws? A currency? A network of infrastructure, utilities, and the means of production? Is it a constitution? A military married to an industrial complex? A functioning economy or marketplace? A shared commitment to a set of values and principles?

What makes a nation a nation? It is a question we hesitate or neglect to broach because: 1) we take it for granted, more consumed by indulgences we treat as entitlements; or 2) we're too cynical, depressed, and perpetually convinced that Hell is eagerly awaiting the arrival of our handbasket; or 3) sensing it's a question weighted with nuclear warheads, you're afraid an in-law will target you with a pot of peas at the Easter family brunch ... And yet, week after week, some nation is on the brink of being tagged as a failed state.

While we may be loath to interact with the bureaucracy of the state, there at least is a state, a process, a structure, an entity, a website, a (dare we say it?) phone number. There is at least some form of entry point to begin the search for a responsible and responsive party. 9-1-1 is no help if there is no one to answer the phone, no one to respond to the emergency, no cell service to make a connection, no roads and no emergency vehicles to drive on them, no water or fire hydrant to douse the fire, no EMT to bandage the wound, no schools to educate the nurses and surgeons, no regulation to ensure safety, no checks and balances to provide accountability, no justice system to enforce laws that won't be written without a governing body.

What makes a nation, a nation? A whole lot. There is something worse than bad governance; it's no governance at all. We may have a mountain of crises facing us and so many flaws we'd have a hard time being picked up at a yard sale, but to quote Monty Python, "We're not dead yet."

The returning exiles settling in and around Jerusalem in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah were not so fortunate. One could presume that this would be a time of rejoicing and excitement. They were coming home. Heirs of the promise given to Abraham and Sarah, "I will make of you a great nation." The Psalmist exulted, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth" ... "Happy are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion."

Unfortunately, when the exiles walked that highway back to Zion, what they found was anything but "the perfection of beauty." Jerusalem was in ruins. Each time I see video footage from Damascus, Syria, I am haunted by the thought of how I would feel or react were I a Syrian refugee returning to the city whenever this interminable civil war ends. How would I feel or react were I a survivor in Hiroshima looking upon the ruins of my home in the late summer of 1945? How would I feel were I a survivor of the Shoah returning to Warsaw, an innocent civilian navigating the ruins of Dresden, a veteran returning to Verdun in 1918, a Chicagoan walking the neighborhood after the great fire, the stunned Joplin

homeowner opening the basement door into the sunbathed slab that used to hold the family room before the tornado? Anticipation and hoped pummeled by the reality of the ruins.

In 539 BCE, Cyrus, king of Persia, defeated the vaunted Babylonians, and decreed that the exiles from Jerusalem and Judah could return to the home they had been forced from some 50 years earlier. Sure, the survivors who remembered, and their children and grandchildren who had been raised with the over-sentimentalized memories of their homeland, eagerly made the journey, intoxicated by visions of Jerusalem in all its pre-exilic glory. But that was not the Jerusalem they would discover upon their return.

Occasionally, one of those *Discovery* or *History* channels will run programs that envision what abandoned cities would look like after a period of years. If it's in the South, say Charlotte, there would surely be a thick layer of kudzu covering everything from the Ballantyne Resort to the Onion Rings on Wendover to the Bank of America tower. The air would be clearer, but I77 would be crumbling, and the squirrels would rule South

Park Mall. However, I'm guessing you could still find plenty of orange barrels out on 485.

In other words, returning to life there would be more complicated than mowing the yard and replacing a few light bulbs. The Israelites had been exiled from Jerusalem for 50 years. It would take more than a bottle of Windex and a Swifter to, as the Psalmist would say, "restore the fortunes of Zion."

The wall of the city, fundamental to Jerusalem's safety, had collapsed and everything that was flammable was in ashes. You can imagine the squatters who had escaped exile, huddled around bonfires, just struggling to survive like so many rural small towns whose economy and leadership had up and walked away, quite literally in the case of Jerusalem.

Previously, for the residents of Jerusalem and Judah, their self-image was wrapped up in their identity as a nation-state, a player in the region, led by a king who, for better or worse, sat on the throne of David, surrounded by diplomats, generals, and royal officials, all busily setting the

tone for the nation and performing the duties of governance. How does our Constitution phrase it? "...Establish Justice, ensure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare..."

There was no structure for any of that when the exiles returned to Jerusalem, and things were not going well. Aristotle opined that nature abhors a vacuum. A power vacuum is created where there is no functioning structure of governance, no established power, or lines of authority; and in a power vacuum, other forces will rush in to fill the void. Inflamed rivalries, conflicting visions, pretensions of authority, factions vying for stature and advantage.

Even if the exiles were flush with capable leaders, there was no potential for the unifying vision of nationhood. Cyrus had allowed the exiles to go home, but he did not give them independence. They would no longer be a nation but would exist as a province of Persia. Any autonomy would be a result of being far enough away from the heart of Persia to avoid the micromanagement of their king.

The Judeans had come home, but home was in bad shape, and they lacked the unifying force of a nation's identity. They had managed to rebuild the temple and were nearing completion of the city wall, but their structure as a people was at best fragile.

It is in this environment that two figures arose with the understanding that rebuilding the city would be useless without reforming its people. Ezra was the priest and Nehemiah was the governor. Together, they sought to center the people, not around buildings, military might, or nationalism, but around the covenant faith that had formed them as a people in the first place.

Our reading today relates a poignant and cathartic day in the life of God's people. The setting is a public square opposite the Water Gate of Jerusalem's reconstructed city wall. The public square is significant because of its accessibility. It was a place where all the people could gather without the restrictions, no admittance signs, and members' only exclusivity that mark many areas of a typical community. It was a public space where all could gather. And so, all were present when Ezra

conducted the ritual of reading the books of Moses, the first five books of scripture known as the Pentateuch, the Torah, or the Law of God.

Specifically for this event, they had constructed a wooden platform in the square upon which Ezra, the priest, would stand, holding open the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had given to Israel on Mt. Sinai after their escape from Egypt. The symbolism here is important as Ezra stands above the people to read the word of the Lord, much like Moses long before, who stood on the mountain to read the tablets of the Law to the people below. We are told here that Ezra proceeded to read the Torah (get this!) from early morning to midday, which to me is a clear sign that we should categorically dismiss any complaints about long sermons here. And look, it says clearly, "The ears of all the people were attentive." In fact, it says they stood up and said, "Amen" (even the Presbyterians!).

Seriously, though, there is so much more than endurance going on here among the people. It is a cathartic moment with a casserole of emotions mixed together, and they wept.

After my dad's death a couple of weeks ago, the family was together in my parents' apartment, and we were sharing the saved voicemails of my father. You see, birthdays were a command performance for Dad.

Unrighteously early on the birthday of every child and grandchild, Dad would call to sing a decidedly noisy and flamboyant rendition of Happy Birthday. It was so out of character.

Now understand, my mother is a professional musician with perfect pitch, whose whole-body spasms when subjected to an out-of-tune vocalist. My dad, however, was no musician and flirted with whatever the opposite of perfect pitch is. So, he, very out of character, would offer this exultant, boisterous, and tuning-challenged birthday song, and half of the joy in hearing it was imagining the squirming and groaning of my mom going on beside him. In fact, it became such a thing that when the phone would ring at dark-thirty on our birthdays, we wouldn't answer, so that we could save the voicemail and savor it. Well, on that evening after his death we listened to a collection of those messages, and there were tears all around as sorrow and joy, regret and thanksgiving, heartbreak and laughter

danced together. It was kind of a stepping back into that which had been so significant in making us and forming us and connecting us. Cathartic.

Such was the pastiche of emotions that rose among the gathered as Ezra read the Torah. In that moment Ezra's spirit was channeling Knute Rockne, Denzel Washington's *Herman Boone*, and Gene Hackman's *Norman Dale* all wrapped into one, hearkening the team to their shared identity and purpose. It drew them back into that which had formed them; into the identity the word of the Lord had given them; into a renewed self-understanding as children of God, beneficiaries of their Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer. It was a powerful reaffirmation of who they were and whose they were. And here's the key to the experience that we dare not miss. The text tells us, the Levites (who were the priests and teachers), walked through the crowd of people, helping them to understand the Torah. So, as Ezra read from the book, from the law of God, the teachers interpreted the reading to make it intelligible to the people. As the text puts it, the teachers "gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading."

How often have you demurred or just stumbled when asked about your faith? *I'm not a religious person. I don't know that much about the Bible.* Unsure of ourselves, but at the same time sure of who we don't want to be associated with, we skirt the edges of the faith question, and quickly change the subject to how this country's handbasket is surely pulling into Hell station, thus allowing ourselves to be more identified with the caustic opinionators of cable and false prophets of the body politic than with the person of Jesus, our Lord. And granted, there are a lot of Christians I'd rather not be associated with, either. So, as a result, our identity is continually troubled, and our sense of purpose becomes aimless without a rudder.

Yet, there in the public plaza beside the Water Gate, the people of Jerusalem, hearing the reading of the covenant, experience a profound awareness of who and whose they are, a true light bulb moment, *O yeah, this is why we're here. And this is what we share together.* For some of us, it is the emotion that wells up in us when we sing a treasured hymn.

It is not political platforms or grass roots insurgencies or twitter challenges or the social media influencers that provide a purposeful path forward. No, it is the shared journey of a community of faith gathered around our sacred story, a story that is the light for our path. It is the empowering support given by the grace of Jesus Christ and channeled by the Spirit of God through each other, that provides for us a meaningful and purposeful way, in this world and the next, though the nations rage and kingdom's totter.

Imagine, there is more power transferred with an adult volunteer helping the children of their church to connect personally with a Bible story; there is more power in that than in any stump speech, or State of the Union address, or Keynote speech at a political convention, or some money back guaranteed self-help program. That is why we keep at it. That is why we are still here. That is why we have hope. For, as Nehemiah says, when we are gathered around our story, "The joy of the Lord is our strength."  
  
Amen.