

“Why We Gather”

By Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy

Nehemiah 8.1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Luke 4.14-21

January 30, 2022

Why do you attend worship? I imagine there are a variety of answers among the congregation, and perhaps even each individual has a different reason depending on the season of life. Author Rachel Held Evans wrote about her experience leaving the evangelical faith and asking questions, and then slowly coming back to a new faith. In her journey she wondered if she had faith at all. In her most recent book she has a beautiful quote: “There are seasons when we hold our faith, and then there are seasons when our faith holds us.”¹ I believe sometimes we cannot articulate why we worship, why we gather, why we believe. Perhaps sometimes we find out later in life, and sometimes we never know what carried us in that time.

The reasons we can articulate might include gathering for community, to be with friends, to ask questions about life and theology, to want to change the world, or because you need comfort, or because your parents make you or your spouse somehow convinces you. These reasons might vary each week. I think we end up in this space for a variety of reasons and they’re all ok. God meets us where we are.

Our scripture passages today are about corporate worship. The people are gathering to hear the Word of God – even the two communities differ in their purpose for gathering. In the book of Nehemiah, we are reading about exiles who have returned to their homes in Jerusalem. They are wondering what happens next. Should they build like they did before? What is their identity? Who are they? What is their purpose? How has the exile changed them as a people?

The reason for their gathering is to find purpose and to find one another. They call on Ezra – a scribe – who would have been the only one trained to read scripture in that time. They gather together in this centralized location and they listen. Ezra reads all morning. I’m imagining that they had this outdoor fellowship hall in which they provided coffee and snacks because they were there for the long haul. Imagine, it would be like instead of you going home for lunch and then coming back for the installation service today, it would just all run together.

It’s possible they already know the words that Ezra will say. They gathered often to hear God’s word and it was something they carried in their hearts. Perhaps what they needed most in that time was what we find in verse eight – interpretation. In this uncertain time, they needed to make sense of God’s Word. They needed understanding – and that is best done in community where we can share our stories and converse and learn from one another. The Word of God was the same, but the interpretation had shifted for them. It was not the same interpretation they

¹ Rachel Held Evans with Jeff Chu, *Wholehearted Faith*. (New York: HarperOne, 2021), 3.

understood before they had been forced from their homes. It was not the same interpretation they had understood before they lost family members.

Scripture does not have the same interpretation for us as today that it did a year ago – as it did pre-pandemic. After staying at home and not entering stores for months, or not being able to gather together in worship or in those communal spaces, re-entering those spaces made me look differently at the passages of exile and how the people returned, but the world was never the same. They couldn't pick up where they left off because too much had changed.

God is still speaking and God is the same but the words were not meant to be inflexible and rigid. One cannot say that God meant one thing for all of eternity because the Bible was not meant to be manipulated like that. I think that God's word being so flexible makes God even more powerful – even more accessible – because it means God can speak to any situation and continue to speak to people. There are themes that reach over time. While we have not experienced exile, perhaps we can see similarities as we have re-entered the world. It was joyous to return in person but now we are in a new place – looking for guidance, gathering to figure out how do we do this new thing? The world pushes for life to be “normal” but it isn't. The world attempts to make changes but we need rest.

This past week someone shared with me a quote from author Glennon Doyle: “Covid is killing us mentally because no one is showing us how to adjust our expectations of ourselves and others. We are killing ourselves trying to make things work like they worked in the old world and we can't do it. We cannot make things work but it feels like we aren't allowed to say that. Because no one is brave enough to say: No. This cannot be done right now. Enough.”

What is the word you need to hear these days? Is it one of comfort? Of challenge? Perhaps this is why we gather, too. In community, our reasons for gathering vary. One person arrives with love and joy and comfort, and another brings their sadness and grief and loss, and in the space of worship they can meet together, and give or receive their gifts, and meet God in that interaction. The people in the book of Nehemiah did listen to the Word all morning but perhaps the true working was afterward as they interpreted the scripture, as they shared their stories about heartache and loss, as they would have comforted one another and listened, holding each other's stories. Perhaps what is most difficult about COVID is that we aren't able to gather in that way right now – to sit around a cup of coffee after worship and just talk about how the world is, how our lives are, and what we need most. Right now, I think many need words of comfort.

The people in the book of Nehemiah searched for comfort and perhaps understanding. The people in the Gospel of Luke gathered to hear a challenging word – though they may not have realized that was what they would receive. Jesus enters the temple and goes up to speak. This would have been a typical service in the synagogue – not the impromptu gathering in Nehemiah where they called the scribe over and said, “hey, let's gather because we need direction.” The people gathered, ready to hear, but perhaps not as ready as they imagined. Jesus is telling them that the words that have prophesied before stating a Messiah would come is fulfilled in him. He is telling them that he is the Messiah.

Jesus was not the person many would have imagined as the Messiah – they were anticipating a king, and Jesus would go on to challenge the empire. They knew Jesus as a child, growing up, and so they knew his awkward teenage phase and maybe his rebellious stage. Even if he was the perfect child, which is certainly debatable in theological circles, they had a certain picture of who he was, and now he’s shifting their perspective of him. His identity hasn’t changed, but their perspective of his identity as this human – this child of Mary and Joseph – is about to shift. We’ll hear their response next week as the story continues in lectionary, but this passage sets this scene up – it sets up this struggle. The author of Luke mentions at the very beginning that Jesus was filled with the Spirit. This comes after Jesus was baptized and driven to the wilderness. This identity as the Messiah was not something he thought about casually – it was discerned and felt by the Spirit. This is important to know as we will enter into questioning and challenging of that identity next week.

Society can make us question quite a bit. I’m hearing from so many people the struggle as to whether or not to wear masks. I hear the struggle about travel and eating out and whether they’re doing enough work because not everything is getting done. This is why we gather together – because we’re all facing difficult decisions every day, and we have to think together about what it is that we are called to do as a Christian community. It’s a place that doesn’t always have all the answers, but that holds the questions loosely and supports one another as decisions are made. It’s a place where we can throw up our hands and say, “I just don’t know, but I’m glad you’re here with me.”

I don’t know why you came here today, but I’m glad you did. I don’t know what difficult decisions you have faced this week, but know I’m praying for you. Sometimes to make those tough decisions we have to take the time in the wilderness, away from the world, like Jesus did, and listen for the Spirit. As much as the world wants us to keep going, we have to take the time to rest. I hope you can take that time regularly, and give thanks to God. Amen.