

EPIPHANY 5 2010: REBUILDING GOD'S TEMPLE ~ REBUILDING YOUR LIFE WITH GOD #3

Nehemiah 8:9-18

REJOICING IN THE WORD

INTRODUCTION:

It's been no secret that our worship series is meant to get us started on living into our Master Plan, here at Divine Street church.

Our stated vision for accomplishing the mission to "go, make disciples for the transformation of the world" (*which is the stated mission of the UMC*) is:

To offer better life through Christ and the ministries of his church by providing for everyone a place to -

- > BELONG to a Christ-centered community of faith,***
- > BELIEVE in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior,***
- > BECOME a disciple of Jesus Christ who loves and serves others through ministry.***

After months of prayerful review and reflection, we also identified **four primary, spiritual values** that we, as a congregation, hold. Spiritual values help us stay focused using the gifts and strengths that continue to make themselves evident. Spiritual values assist us in evaluating current ministry efforts, as well as new ideas that present themselves.

With all this in mind, as we endeavor to live into the Master Plan, Divine Street UMC will:

- 1. Reach out to the Dunn Community,**
- 2. Offer diversity of worship experiences for all ages**
- 3. Engage in small group ministries**
- 4. Partner with other members of the Christian community.**

We will examine and reflect on these more in depth at a future time.

For those who have been here from the beginning of the process -- you will remember that what initiated the formulation of a Master Plan was the desire for a new fellowship hall.

Rightly so -- the church leadership understood that such an endeavor required a more deep and full review of our ministry needs --- and a season of prayer as to the direction God would be leading us in the years to come.

Enhancement, improvement, and expansion of the facilities is definitely part of our Master Plan. And so, during the Church Council meeting this past Monday -- the formation of a building committee was approved. This committee will be guided by the Master Plan -- which includes facilities recommendations.

We are presently in the process of praying and recruiting individuals to serve on this committee.

And like the Master Plan -- this will not be rushed process, but those serving will be asked to move forward with regular times of meeting together, as well as information gathering and other pertinent activities between those times.

So -- yes -- we are spending time in worship seeking God's Word and guidance as a congregation as we begin living into the Master Plan...

However... this time is also meant to speak to us as individuals.

Whether you are a member of the congregation, a regular attendee of worship on Sundays, or a first-time guest with us. It is hoped that this series speaks to you, personally.

Because, whether we are rebuilding our life together as a congregation -- or rebuilding our personal lives -- it all begins with the relationship we have with God -- through Jesus Christ.

We are the Temple of God. We are the Community of Faith. The bricks and mortar of our buildings -- and the structures within our way of life -- are important. However, we are the living stones with which God's builds his Temple -- the means through which God's presence is made most tangible in our world.

A CLEAR SHIFT: NEHEMIAH 8:

If you've been reading Ezra and Nehemiah on your own during these past few weeks -- you will have noticed a major change in emphasis in chapter 8 of Nehemiah.

Up to this point, the book has been about *re-construction*. But now the focus shifts to the **re-INSTRUCTION** of God's people.

Last Sunday -- we focused on *SETTING THE ALTAR* within the center of our heart. We affirmed that a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ is the foundation of our life.

Today, we're going to focus on the impact of **the Word** on our lives when we -
- read it...study it...act on it.

When you allow the Word to penetrate your life on a daily basis, it has the power to transform your life. Let us reflect upon several ways the Word of God -- the Scriptures -- impact your life.

FIRST: It has the power of conviction

In our lesson, we learn that when they heard the Book of the Law read - the people began to weep.

It is true -- when you read the Bible on a daily basis, something begins to happen in your life...You become aware of the brokenness that you weren't aware of before.

(the old phrasing was = "convicted of your sinfulness.")

In addition -- you become aware that only God can make the changes -- set aright -- the things you were seeking to do on your own -- or that others told you that you had to do before God would accept you.

The power of God's Word to convict us in such a way is described in the NT book of Hebrews, 4:12:

*"For the Word of God is alive and active.
Sharper than any double-edged sword."*

That's pretty sharp!

And what is sharper than a double-edged sword? **A scalpel.**

In ancient times -- a sword was both a symbol and literal means for condemnation and death.

But a scalpel (*both in ancient times and in our day*) is used for healing.

When I allow the Word of God to be part of my everyday life, it gets to those places that are unresolved inside of me - places that I've repressed...often places that I'm not even aware of.

Any time we are not allowing the Scriptures to penetrate to the core of who we are as individuals -- we end up practicing "religion" -- rather than having a life-changing, relationship with Jesus Christ. That's why so many religious people -- people who are seen as good "church people" -- go only so far in living for God. And it's why they also appear to others to be hypocrites.

Jesus recognized this condition among a group of very religious Jews called the Pharisees. They followed every letter of the Law -- performed every ritual with perfection -- and preached to others to do the same. But, he identified them as being like "white-washed tombs." On the outside, they looked great with all their religiosity. They appear to be spiritual folks. But on the inside, there was nothing but death. No real, personal relationship with God.

And here's the problem with what Jesus saw then -- and what happens even today:

Religiosity creates self-righteousness: *"I'm right -- you're wrong."*

When you are dealing with religion -- you're always pointing out the splinter that's in your sister or brother's eye, while never dealing with the log that's in your own eye.

That's why the Pharisees had such problems with what Jesus taught and did. And it's why it was ultimately religious people who demanded Jesus be crucified.

But, when you allow the Word to penetrate your heart and mind -
- it's no longer about other people's sin -- but your own.

When the people heard the Book of the Law read -- they wept -- because they were convicted of their own sin -- and the unfaithfulness of the generations that came before.

HOWEVER...

THE SECOND thing the Scriptures do is Change our Perspection of God as being Condemning to God as being Redeeming, Healing, and Forgiving.

While the people were convicted by the Word, and began to weep aloud -- Ezra says to them: *"Go home, enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."*

In other words: "you have been forgiven."

Weeping indicates guilt and confession, but the moment that you repent -- you can celebrate because God has relieved you of your guilt through his mercy and forgiveness. It is because of this that the people could go back to their homes to eat and drink and celebrate with great joy.

Now, they know the God whom they worship and serve is not one of condemnation, but redemption. God has commuted the punishment of their sin, and forgiven them. In and through this present generation -- God has restored his relationship with Israel.

When you read the Bible -- the Holy Spirit makes known to you the God for whom you set the altar of your heart. This is God who desires your deliverance, not your destruction. God is not an unfeeling, distant landlord. God is loving. God is near. **God desires a personal relationship with you.**

The problem that many church folks run into is that **we don't see the difference between religion and relationship.**

We tend to teach the Bible as a legal document, instead of a love letter.

Often, we speak of, teach and live our lives understanding God as essentially Judge --

- instead of seeing our relationship with God as a child to a loving Father.

If we approach the Bible from a legalistic interpretation, our focus is on commandments. But if we approach the Bible relationally, it's about covenant with a personal, loving God.

From a legalistic perspective, the Bible is about condemning the lost.

From a relational perspective, it's about saving the lost.

One of our favorite evangelistic Bible verses we Christians love to use -- even write it out with big markers on poster boards and wave around at sporting events (*even those that take place during worship times*) is John 3:16:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

We should really include verse 17 -- because it goes with vs. 16:

"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but save the world through him."

Jesus made it clear the kind of relationship God desires to have with us.

In the Jewish community of Jesus' day -- one always addressed God formally. The words used were very reverent. The names used spoken of God's majesty, God's power, God's authority.

Jesus taught his disciples that when they prayed to God, they should address him as "Abba" = 'Father'. But, it goes even further -- **"Abba" is the Aramaic word** (*the common language of the people*) -- **that was used by a small child**. It was the familial, enthusiastic, loving word: **"Daddy!" or "Papa!"**

The Bible -- *yes, even the OT* -- brings us to understand that God -- who may punish and discipline -- is also God who forgives and redeems. God is the one in whom we can trust as a little child trusts and runs to a loving father.

This is the type of relationship the Bible tells you that God wants to have with you: **personal, trusting and intimate...** not one of condemnation, but salvation. For, we come to understand especially through Jesus Christ -- that God is the God of life, resurrecting life, restoring life, *better life*.

Having been forgiven, redeemed and restored...

GOD'S WORD HELPS YOU RECLAIM YOUR IDENTITY.

In junior high -- my girlfriend was my backyard neighbor -- AND we also attended the same church and UMYF. Whenever I would go to pick her up from her house to go somewhere, it didn't matter whether it was to just cross A-1-A to go to the beach -- or ride our bikes around our small island community -- or even to go to youth group...Laura's mother would always call out to us: **"Remember who you are!"**

There are times we forget who we are -- that is, followers of Jesus Christ -- that we are to live and be like Jesus. And because of that - we need to be reminded.

That was the place in life where the returning Jews found themselves. For many of them, they had lived with and among the Persians all their lives. Finally -- after a generation or two -- they were returning to Jerusalem -- the Promised Land.

Upon returning, it was important for them to reclaim their identity. There had been those who kept the stories and traditions alive -- but they really didn't know who they were. Now, they stood on the very spot where the Presence of God has been pleased to dwell with their ancestors. And they heard for the first time the Word of God penetrate their hearts and minds in ways through which they truly could reclaim their identity as the chosen people.

As Ezra read from the Holy Scrolls -- they heard with new ears (new insight) of a God who had chosen them -- and that they had been set apart to be a blessing -- a message to the world of God's loving presence.

We mentioned religious rituals and festivals earlier. We pointed out that often we perform them without any real thought or personal engagement. But, the festivals of the Jews were used to commemorate the power of God -- and also to reconnect people to the purposes of God.

And so when the people of Nehemiah's time read the Scriptures, they heard about the Festival of Booths -- Sukkoth.

(From last Sunday, we remember the festival commemorates the 40 year period during which the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, living in temporary shelters -- and it also recalled the receiving of the 10 Commandments.)

The Biblical scholar and teacher Warren Wiersbe observes that three things happen simultaneously during this festival:

First, there is a looking back - to the days of wandering in the wilderness. It was important to their identity for the Jews to remember they were the people of the Passover -- it was God who delivered them from slavery and death -- And that God has saved them for a purpose -- his purpose.

Whenever you lack identity -- you begin to live with no purpose in life. If you don't understand your true identity and purpose, you're lost and wandering in the wilderness of existence. God's calling and your identity in God is fully revealed through consistent reading, studying and praying of the scriptures.

Dr. Weirsbe points out the second thing the festival provided was a present outlook.

The Festival of Booths was also a harvest festival that coincided with the summer crops.

Our American festival of Thanksgiving has roots in this Biblical festival. The pilgrims strived to base their lives on Biblical precepts. When they were looking for an appropriate way to express their thanks for their survival and for the harvest, they looked to the Bible, and found this festival of the OT people.

When we immerse ourselves in the stories and teachings of the Bible, we have a heightened awareness of the blessings of God in our lives. The Word of God empowers us to recognize the blessings we're experiencing right now -- and to give thanks to God.

The third thing Dr. Weirsbe points out is that the Festival of the Booths is about looking ahead. It is a time to look at how God is calling you to be part of his blessing and renewing work in the world in the days, months and years ahead.

Past, present, and future -- with God at the center --
- defining not only who we are...
- but, maybe more importantly, who we are becoming.

The power of the Bible to help us answer the question, "*Just who will you be?*", works by inspiring us, guiding us, and calling us to something more than we are today.

When we make the Word of God a regular part of our lives, and allow it to imbed itself in our hearts and minds -- we then begin to see just who we will be in God.

Many of us fall short of God's intended purpose for our lives because we don't know who we are. We've settled halfway along the journey -- and we've set up permanent camp in the wilderness.

We've done so because we've made mistakes in the past...
..or we've allowed others' opinions or desires or experiences to determine who we are.

Once the returning Jews heard the Word of God for themselves, they realized that God had a purpose and a plan for them -- for this generation. Yes -- it was based on (and in a sense the continuation of) God's original plan for Israel --

-- but in this day and time and circumstance...

-- it was for THEM -- to embrace and to be empowered by.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we must remember that our identity is also rooted in God's Word > the Word-made-flesh.

It is so important for us (individuals/congregation) to remember that whatever we do, we have to keep moving forward into God's purpose and promises for our lives.

We (individuals/congregation) cannot settle in places of mediocrity and moments of complacency.

It was through the reading of the Word of God that the Jews of Nehemiah's time realized God wasn't through with them, yet.

And God isn't finished with you, either.

That means you need to keep pressing through to get to that place of promise. And God has provided you the means to do so. That's why preachers and teachers are always on you to read, and study, and pray the Bible....

...the Scriptures are the primary means through which God helps you discover who you will be -- what your life is all about.

TWO FINAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE POWER OF THE WORD OF GOD IN OUR LIVES...

THE WORD OF GOD MOVES US INTO THE WORK OF GOD

The people were told to go take food, and the celebration, and to proclaim the Word they'd just heard and received throughout their community.

The Word of God doesn't allow you to sit around and enjoy the blessings of God for yourself. We are called to be in mission to others. (individually/congregationally)

For those who can't afford the party..we are to take the party to them. It's not enough to just experience God's healing and health in our own life. Because we don't experience the true joy of such healing and health until we carry into the life of other people.

Our job is the same of Nehemiah's project:

- rebuilding our economy
- providing quality education
- insure clean, safe water
- all the things that make for a high quality of life within a community.

And yet -- true transformation can only happen when it does so within the heart of an individual. And we proclaim and announced that it is done in and through the power and presence of Jesus Christ.

We are called to be a witness in word and deed.

God desires to do great things in and through us.

FINALLY - the Word of God Brings Joy into our Life

It's the old debate -- *happiness vs. joy*.

What most of us are pursuing in life is happiness.

But happiness is an illusion.

There is a difference between happiness and joy.

Happiness is based on temporal, external circumstances: "*I'll be happy when...*"

Joy is a well-spring that flows from a life with God.

But joy is not automatic. Joy is not circumstantial...however, we need to be aware that Joy is conditional.

'Conditional', because the joy of the Lord comes to us through the channels that God has established...

...and it is our choice whether or not we choose to pursue and access those means of joy that God provides.

How can I experience the joy of the Lord in my life?

Well, there were **three things the people learned** as Ezra read and interpreted the Scriptures to them:

First- joy comes through **experiencing God forgiveness** in your life.

Second- joy comes from a **personal relationship with God**. It comes through not only knowing who we are, but whose we are.

Third- joy comes through **knowing and aligning your life** with the purposes and mission of God.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we understand and have come to trust that when you immerse yourself in the Word of God, confess your sins, receive forgiveness in Jesus Christ, understand who God has called you to be, and begin living and doing his will -then you will experience a joy in life that will exceed your happiest moments. And it is in that experience that the day -- each day -- becomes holy -- a "day of the Lord."

DO YOU WANT TO REBUILD YOUR LIFE WITH GOD?

This day - each day - **begin with the Word of God**.

This day - each day - **commit yourself to God, and serve God**.

This day - each day - **realize the day belongs to the Lord**, live each day in such a way that gives God joy.

The scriptures says, "the joy **of the Lord** is my strength"...so when you do the things that give God joy...that is your strength in life...that is when you will experience joy in the Lord.

REBUILDING YOUR LIFE WITH GOD

is accomplished through

REJOICING IN GOD'S WORD.