

Do you remember the old motorcycles, the ones without electric starters? We had to kick start the engine to get the motor running. It could take a long time before that engine finally kicked over, caught fire and warmed up. Our leg would be so tired but the openness of the road ahead was exciting to think about - what new discovery would take place while out in the beautiful countryside. Even before we hit the road we felt free. We could sense the wind in our face, relaxed and wondering about the amazing beauty around us. We knew intuitively we would let go of problems as we hit the road. Road trips are like that. Sure, there's the preparation, maybe some anxiety. But once we get on the road our mind clears, we feel a release, we feel renewed, and rejuvenated.

The Jewish people have been on a long road trip. They have returned home after 50 years of captivity by the Babylonians, after 50 years of living in a foreign environment, after 50 years of learning another's culture and language, after 50 years of forgetting their heritage, their ancestors, their faith. The priest, Ezra, knew what to do to kick start these people who had forgotten what God's word had meant to them. He opened the Torah, unrolled the scroll, and read the Law. He read it aloud and the people stood up and they listened; they raised their hands, like our young boy in VBS, and they said, "Amen! Amen!" meaning "It is firm, established."

I believe faith journeys, like life itself, take many paths, different as night and day. Life is non-linear; it's not a straight path; born at point "A" and then a straight line to point "B" death. There are many choices and decisions, roads and journeys we take throughout our lives. Sure, some are straight, but mostly they are twisting, bending, crooked, zigzagging, up and down, back and forth.

And our faith journeys are no different. We experience times in our lives when our faith is in doubt, confused, unsure – times when our faith abandons us and we feel entirely alone – times when we hit a dry spell, a desert of disbelief.

The Beatles sang, "The long and winding road that leads me to your door." The Jewish people had been on a long and winding road of exile. We want to get off our "long and winding roads," that take us away from God. We want to find ourselves as a new creation, energized again.

We may find ourselves in places where we need to kick start our faith; when we haven't given ourselves to prayer, when we haven't let our lives speak for our beliefs, when we haven't opened the Bible and read God's word. How do I rediscover the sacredness of a relationship with God or the beauty of created life or the value of serving others, extending hands of kindness and gentleness? Where has your faith journey taken you?

And the people bowed down and worshiped the Lord. And they wept upon rediscovering God's word. They wept as they listened to the words of the Law read

aloud. They wept tears with their faces to the ground - overwhelmed by not hearing the Word of God read and interpreted for them since their exile - overwhelmed because they had fallen away from God's word - overwhelmed because they had drifted away from God's Law.

Nehemiah the governor and Ezra the priest said to them, "Do not mourn or weep, this day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." Is there anything in your life that needs new-found strength – a fresh start?

The scene is similar to Moses reading the Law to the people at Mt. Sinai, 800 years earlier, before they entered into the Promised Land. Ezra's reading was a repetition once more of the giving of the Law as a way for God to make a claim on his people.

When reading God's word I want to react with "YES! YES!" double fist pump and yet I also reel under the heaviness of our times. The reaction of tears and mourning by the Jewish faithful must have been a mixed reaction of the people. I suspect there was a great deal of guilt. They cried. They wept for their sins; followed by repentance for their indifference to the word of God.

And yet, there had to be a great deal of joy when the people also learned that God was a gracious and forgiving God. God had not abandoned them, had not given up on them; God still wanted them as God's own. And the people affirmed

what they heard from God's Law. They responded with the spontaneous Amen! Amen! They lifted their hands as a sign of agreement with what they heard. "Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground."

Ezra must have been moved by the reaction of the people. When I witness our people serving God by serving in VBS, in Mission Projects, in Adult Classes, in Coffee Fellowship, Stephen Ministry, Memorial Services, Ushering and Serving Communion, I am moved too. Ezra announced to the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep," but celebrate what's just happened between you and God. Amen! Amen! He urged them, "Go your way, eat the fat, and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to the Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." The people could celebrate the goodness of the Lord.

I know it's hard to celebrate when we have the shootings in Charleston, S.C., San Francisco, and now Chattanooga, TN so fresh in our minds. I don't know about you, but my heart is ripped apart when I hear of another shooting in our country against innocent people. How do we stop the violence? It's all I can do to listen to the news. It weighs so very heavy and I wonder how we, as your pastors, hold all the negative news for you; how we pray appropriately for victims and families, for our country and those working to protect it. Collectively we cry for our nation, for our people.

Ezra wanted the people to return to their faith. Ezra wanted his people to appreciate the special place they had in the heart and the mind of God. This is the goal of Vacation Bible School. We want every child to know how special they are in God's sight, how much they are loved by Jesus. And it's our goal here in Worship – You hold a special place in the heart and mind of God.

We in America should have a sympathetic understanding of what Ezra was trying to do. We have people in our country agonizing and stressing over the fact that we as a people need to recapture what it means to be American. Politicians, military leaders, educators, professionals, pastors, talk show hosts and business leaders talk about recapturing American values and redeveloping the cultural awareness that made our nation great. That often means going back into our history to examine what made a frontier nation great. As Christians we should always be about the task of what makes our faith great – about loving God and loving others!

As Ezra called the people back to the covenant, we need to rehearse the gospel of salvation over and over again in our worship, be given to the study of God's word so that we can apply it, and be regularly in communion with one another at the Lord's Table. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the covenant Ezra shared with the people. Jesus died and rose again, so that the covenant is real for us by the manner in which he comes to us, which is through the word and sacraments.

“Do not mourn on such a day as this! For today is a sacred day before the Lord your God – it is a time to celebrate with a hearty meal, and to send presents to those in need, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. You must not be dejected and sad!” This dramatic story ends with a high note of joy – unrealistic joy? – except that it comes from God and our faith in God.

When the word of God is read, preached and interpreted, **joy** can drive our faith to serve others, even in the midst of calamity, chaos and confusion. When the word of God is proclaimed, it doesn't have to be sad and somber; it can bring **joy** and that's what we hear in today's story. God's ways may initially cause us sadness because we realize our sins, but **joy** comes because God wants to give us his kingdom. Reading the Bible can bring us closer to God and bring us **unexpected joys**.

In Jerusalem at the Water Gate on that dramatic day when Ezra preached, the people soaked up the Word and applied it. That meant sadness for shortcomings but gladness for the grace of God. The experience of law and gospel has been experienced by millions upon millions of people since Ezra's day. Many come to church expecting a stern rebuke for their fallenness, only to discover the **incomparable joy of acceptance, love and Christian fellowship** as they gather under the Word of God.

Joy in the Lord is a good antidote for grief. Joy in the Lord is a source of strength. Joy in the Lord defends us from being angry with God or one another. For some, joy and the Law do not compute! For the Law always accuses! Yet, here in our story today, the Law brings joy. When the world around us seems incomprehensible, the written word of the Bible can and will bring us joy and strength. Joy in the Lord shows our dedication to the Lord, our commitment to God's ways. It shows our faith. Joy drives our faith. God's own joy in us is the source of our strength.

Amen! Amen!