

New Normals Are Messy: Conversations in Ezra and Nehemiah

Week 4 – Nehemiah 8-9

As we return to sanctuaries and church activities after such a long time being apart from one another and having our routines and practices disrupted, we know that things won't just "go back to normal" overnight. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the unique history of Israel's return to Jerusalem and the surrounding towns following around seventy years of exile in Babylon. The returning and rebuilding processes were messy, to say the least.

We'll spend the next several weeks looking at these two books together, and seeing what the living Word has to teach us from their experiences for our situation today. Today we'll look at chapters 8-9 of Nehemiah, considered to be part of the "Ezra memoir" of Ezra 7-10.

Let's start with a little refresher: Ezra, a scribe, was the main figure in the religious reestablishment of Judah; Nehemiah, the governor, was the main figure in the national reestablishment of Judah. Chapters 8-9 of Nehemiah seem to have been relocated to their current position at some point over the millennia to intertwine the stories of these two figures. They seem to fill in the gap between Ezra 7-8 and Ezra 9-10.

Remember that the main goal in passing these scriptures from generation to generation, whether orally or in writing, was to preserve the story and the message for God's people. Things like chronology or keeping the source material sorted just weren't priorities like they might be for modern readers today who have been trained to study history in certain ways. For example, read the story of the flood in Genesis and see how many repetitions there are, as two different accounts of the story are simply mashed together. No less scriptural or faithful; just different from what we're used to.

These two transplanted chapters include Ezra's reading of the Law to the people and something like a psalm of distress.

Read Nehemiah 7:73b-8:3, 5-8. Now that Ezra has arrived with his knowledge and dedication to the Torah/Law, the people ask him to come and teach them. He stands at the Water Gate, which was outside the Temple area; therefore, anyone could come to listen, even the ritually defiled. All could hear and learn the Law. The first day of the seventh month would, over time, come to be known as New Year's Day, or Rosh Hashanah. Ezra blesses the Lord, and the people say "Amen" and worship. Ezra has a whole team to help interpret the Law to the people, so that all can understand it.

- Who helps to interpret scripture to you?
- Does our interpretation reach beyond our "temple area"? How will the huge upswing in online worship broadcasts and videos during the pandemic have an impact on transmitting the gospel? Or will it?

Read Nehemiah 8:9-12. Mourning and weeping were likely reactions of repentance for having disobeyed the law they just re-learned. Ezra and the Levites reassure the people – “this day is holy; do not be grieved.” And they are told to eat and drink and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared (such as the poor or foreigners in the city), because the day is holy.

- On our holiest days, how do we send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared? How do we spread the holiness we celebrate?

8:13-18 talks about reestablishing the festival of booths, when the people would live in huts for a week, hearing the Law, to commemorate the journey in the wilderness towards the Promised Land.

- What reenactments of Bible stories have you experienced or participated in? What was it like? How do we make God’s Word come alive?

Chapter 9 has Ezra retelling the abridged version of the Old Testament from Creation up to the present day. It’s the story of God’s people in selected scenes. As you read through it, take note: which scenes are emphasized? What scenes were left out that you would have included?

Read 9:1-3. Ezra’s recitation is preceded by the people assembling “with fasting and in sackcloth and with earth on their heads.” These were signs of repentance meant to depict themselves like the dead – no food, sackcloth the fabric of burial shrouds, earth on their heads as though buried. The Israelite separate themselves from all foreigners; not, in this case, like the sending off of the wives and children in Ezra 9-10, but rather because they are repenting for the collective sins of Israel.

- How do we as (Lutheran) Christians enact public repentance? Do we?
- The heading in the study Bible for this passage is labeled “National Confession.” Some would say that recent (and not-so-recent) efforts to have reckonings regarding race, equality, treatment of indigenous peoples, renaming roads and buildings and teams, taking down statues, calls for reform and conversation – that all of this is a form of national confession. Some call these efforts and protests and changes unpatriotic; others call them an exercise in patriotism. When it comes to talking about the problems of our nation, how do we have conversations more than arguments? How can our faith guide our conversations? When should we don sackcloth? When shouldn’t we?
- After a pandemic when certain practices were on hold, are there things within our collective (Lutheran) Christian identity that could “die” as we repent and move forward?

9:4-6 talks about creation; 7-8 addresses Abram/Abraham. Much of the following circles around the Promised Land and the related covenants that go with it. Verses 9-15 talk about the Exodus.

Read 9:16-21 and 26-31. These verses encapsulate the cycle of God's people in the Hebrew Bible. They mess up; there are consequences; God is steadfast; they cry out; God intervenes; life is good; repeat.

- What cycles are we stuck in? How is God responding?

Read 9:32-37. This brings the story up to the present. What now? It is likely that the story from Ezra 9-10, expelling the foreign wives and children, happened next chronologically.

- Did the people overcorrect?
- How do we handle guilt, either personally or collectively?
- Christians need to be careful when it comes to "reading Jesus in" to the Old Testament; that being said, how would Jesus respond to Ezra and the people here?

New normals are messy, especially since they come on the heels of old normals that are also messy. In what ways is our past shaping our present? How do you think the present pandemic circumstances will shape our future?

For next week, please read Nehemiah 1-4.

Sources

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