

“Power of the Pulpit”
Nehemiah 8:1-12; Luke 4:14-21
3rd Sunday in Epiphany
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The morning of our current President’s inauguration, the chosen preacher for the day – a Baptist pastor of a church in Dallas, stepped into the pulpit of St. John’s Episcopal Church and opened the Bible to the book of Nehemiah. The chosen text was a transparently political choice – Nehemiah, the “self glorifying entrepreneur,”¹ as one biblical scholar calls him, is credited with rebuilding Jerusalem in the 5th century BCE, a project that began with the rebuilding of the walls surrounding the city. “You see,” Trump’s ordained lackey said defensively that January day, “God is NOT opposed to building walls,” as if he knew it was a stretch for a white Christian evangelical preacher to be bearing such a claim.² The preacher drew some other comparison as well labeling Nehemiah’s chief critics, Sanballat and Tobias, as the “mainstream media” of Nehemiah’s day. Ignore them, the preacher told the then President-elect. They will just slow you down.

Obviously, the message the preacher delivered that day is diametrically opposed to the values of this congregation announced by the sign in the front yard proclaiming “immigrants and refugees are welcome.” And it’s no secret that I believe that the way to make this nation great is not by going backward in time, not by treating immigrants fleeing violence or seeking work as criminals, not by pandering to white supremacists, or holding 800,000 employees hostage like pieces of paper in a real estate transaction. But I have to say that what struck me in reading this preacher’s sermon again this week was not so much the differences between our values, but the similarities between how we use scripture. Here we are today, opening the same book of Nehemiah, albeit with a very different interpretation. Here we are, like the preacher on inauguration day gathered together to hear words from scripture that are supposed to guide us, challenge us, disrupt us, edify us. We both come to worship expecting a text to speak to us this day. It’s this similarity – communities that can claim the same Lord, the same Bible, the same God and come to vastly different conclusions - that leads good-hearted skeptics to reject religious faith or fed-up believers to leave it all behind. “You can make a text say whatever you want it to say,” people say. “If the same text can be used to preach totally opposite viewpoints, what good is the text at all?”

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), 2003, p 363.

² Robert Jeffress, “When God Chooses a Leader,” January 20, 2017. I chose not to name the pastor in the course of this sermon because the critique is not personal - https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/01/20/god-is-not-against-building-walls-the-sermon-donald-trump-heard-before-his-inauguration/?noredirect=on&postshare=3821484938340491&utm_term=.6762cb0f0e2a

Rather than acknowledging these very logical observations, the church has upped the ante through the centuries declaring the power of the pulpit to be nearly sacramental. “The Preached Word of God Is the Word of God,” blasts the Swiss Confession of the 16th Century. “the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if [the minister] be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good.” Yet alongside the power of the pulpit acknowledged by the church, we’re given some very helpful guardrails for interpretation so we don’t have to take what any preacher says at face value. And it seems to me in these times when the Christian faith in North America continues to be attached to partisan agendas of many kind that a big part of a Christian’s responsibility is to be able, not only to deconstruct what a preacher says for yourself, but also be able to interpret for others when and how the power of the pulpit goes astray. So I offer you three basic interpretive principles that every Christian should know when reading scripture.

The first is interpreting a text in light of its own context. Nehemiah led Jews – a minority group in the Persian Empire – back to their land which had been threatened or invaded by the Egyptian empire, then the Assyrian Empire, then the Babylonian Empire, then the more benign Persian Empire. Neither a white, male Texan Baptist, nor Mr. Trump himself can be legitimately compared to refugee exiles returning to their ravaged homeland. The US is more like the empire and if anybody resembles Israelites without a home, it’s more like the immigrants Mr. Trump wants to categorically keep out. Context matters when you interpret scripture.

So does interpreting scripture in light of scripture, a second principle. Yes, Nehemiah built a wall. And yes, the book of Nehemiah leads to the horrific decision for Israelite men to send away the foreign wives they’ve married while in exile after reading Torah. They actually send them back home with their own mixed-race children (if there is such a thing). This focus on faithfulness through purity is a consistent theme throughout the Old Testament. It is one marker in a long and ongoing debate within Judaism about what makes a person Jewish – is it ethnicity? Is it biology? Is it Torah observance? The church also struggles with questions of identity and belonging.

What’s important to notice is that Ezra-Nehemiah’s focus on purity is contested by an avalanche of other texts within the Old Testament, arguing the opposite. The book of Ruth is about a faithful Moabite woman who becomes the grandmother of King David – a strong voice against Ezra & Nehemiah’s exclusivism. Or the prophet Elijah sent to save a foreign widow and her child from starvation. The warnings all through the Torah that providing hospitality to strangers is not optional. And Isaiah’s declaration that God will give to those Moabites and Ammonites once excluded from the Temple, and to eunuchs who don’t fit the gender binary – a name and a place better than sons and daughters. At best, Nehemiah’s focus on purity encourages the church to think about what boundaries are important to keep in place to maintain a community’s values and belonging. The church has set that boundary on baptism and belief. There is no basis in the church for setting that boundary around nationality or race.

A third interpretive lens for the church is the one who we believe was God with us – Emmanuel. We read scripture in light of Jesus. Look at how Jesus starts

his ministry today. He reads from the scroll of Isaiah, aligning himself with the same prophet who preached against defining faith in terms of ethnicity, in favor of faith defined by practice. A generous prophecy from Isaiah that predicted Jerusalem's rising prominence would be defined by all the people from all the nations who would stream to it. Foreigners coming to Jerusalem would be a sign of Jerusalem's strength, not something that needed to be defended, but something to be celebrated. And God would always be on the lookout for the poor, proclaiming their jubilee year, their release.

That's the beginning of Jesus' ministry, which is probably why Trump's preacher on inauguration day left Jesus entirely out of the sermon. Doesn't even mention his name, which is really bizarre for an evangelical preacher. But it makes perfect sense if your main purpose in preaching is to advocate for a border wall. Because while it's not unreasonable for anyone in this country to raise questions about security, reduce the possibilities of terrorism, look for ways to cut down on dangerous drugs entering the country, and apprehend criminals that cross borders; while it's not wrong to think about the safety of all people, if you bring Jesus into the conversation he's not going to sit quietly while you attach his name to your wall-building. He's going to ask some uncomfortable questions, based on his actions in the Bible. Questions like, what about the terrorism committed against Black people by white supremacists or police who still do not acknowledge their bias? What about the hungry poor standing on what seems like every single traffic light in our city – where is their security? What about 70+ people shot by one white man in Las Vegas, black parishioners killed at prayer by one white boy in Charleston, SC, Jews murdered by a neo-Nazi, kids killed by their own classmate FL and lots of other places? Where's the billions of dollars and outrage to protect us from them?³ Questions like, "Do you really think American lives are more precious than those coming from south of the border? Do you really think I will stand with you on that point?"

Those are the question that I think the biblical text leads us to ask, if we take it seriously and investigate it for ourselves, which is what keeps me coming back to it. I think we'll find in the current debate that there is no way that this God, who announces from the pulpit God's Jubilee year project - the remittance of all debts held against the poor – there is no way this God supports the building a border wall. And yet I'm glad the preachers go on preaching for 2 reasons. I went back to Trump's pastor's sermon. The 3rd point of his sermon expressed this point – "The good news is that the same God who empowered Nehemiah nearly 2500 years ago is available to every one of us today who is willing to humble himself and ask for His help." That statement is absolutely true, according to scripture. It serves as a warning to any leader who puts himself above God's judgment and as a comfort for

³ Driving into church on the day I preached this sermon, NPR reported the Anti-Defamation league's conclusion that 98% of extremist-related murders in the US in 2018 were carried out by right-wing extremists, a large percentage of whom were white supremacists. <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/27/689121187/masculinity-and-u-s-extremism-what-makes-young-men-vulnerable-to-toxic-ideologie>

those who seek it. Maybe that's what the Swiss confession meant when it said the Word of God remains still good and true."

But the preachers should go on preaching because the power of the pulpit never stays within the control of the preacher - not once it's out in the world. I know all kinds of people who grew up hearing all kinds of questionable interpretations of the biblical texts which compelled them to start investigating the Bible for themselves. Like the doctor in this congregation who treated the mother and child who are featured on the front page of the Sun this morning.⁴ This mother walked from Honduras to Texas with her 3 year old child, born with severe developmental limitations. I said she walked from Honduras to Texas. Speaks no English. Was guided by God, she says, to the Johns Hopkins hospital where someone told her - there you will find help. She found help and continues to attribute that to God. And here's the crazy thing.

She's absolutely right. Because you see long ago that doctor heard a story about a vulnerable family running from violence and poverty, so poor or so hated that they couldn't find any room at the inn. A story that convinced her that when a mother and child show up a few days before Christmas, the Christian's first question isn't, "how do we keep these people out?" "How do we slander them as criminals or divide their families?" But rather, "how do I love the stranger God has sent to me this day?" And while I'm sure that doctor sat through some garbage sermons in her time, the power of the pulpit got through. It undid her as the Word of God has done to countless people before. Didn't make her a saint. Just made her a Christian. So we keep gathering each week, keep opening the text just like the people in Jesus' time, just like the crowd gathered before Ezra. We open the Word, knowing that the Word finds its way, weasels its way into our hearts. The Word brings down nations and lifts up the unlikeliest of the poor. The Word of God remains still good and true.

⁴ Liz Bowie & Thalia Juarez, "A Mother's Pilgrimage: Carrying her disabled child, Honduran woman seeking medical care finds her way to Baltimore," *The Baltimore Sun*, January 24, 2019.

<https://www.baltimoresun.com/health/bs-md-immigrant-journey-20181220-story.html>