

MAKES SENSE

Nehemiah 7:73b – 8:3, 5-6, 8-10

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The sermon begins today with a tale of two high school Latin teachers. The first, a recent summa cum laude graduate of a storied institution of higher learning; the latter, a fellow teacher with more modest academic achievements. Both had passed all the exams and jumped through all the hoops necessary to teach the “dead language” to eager high school students, including me. Don't ask me why I chose to take Latin; years later I am still asking myself that question. I think I heard that it helped you on your SATs. I wish they had been right.

The first teacher had no problems demonstrating her vast knowledge and command of the Latin language to her students. With great efficiency she would conjugate verbs, parse sentences and whiz through vocabulary. It was obvious she earned every bit of her summa cum laude. The problem, though, was that she left everyone else in the dust. In the universe of romance languages she was on a different planet than the rest of us; her freakish fluency in the subject contributing to an ever-increasing gap between teacher and student. She simply could not comprehend our inability to comprehend.

The latter teacher was different. It's not that she didn't know the subject; it's just that she had to work hard to acquire it. Just like us. Just like us, she earned her skills through hard work and perseverance. Just like us she encountered trouble spots along the way and had to work through those. I may have appreciated Latin more with the first teacher, but I understood it a lot better with the second.

You know what makes a good teacher? It's not how much they know, or how many degrees they have hanging on their office wall, or how much tenure they've accrued or what books they've written. What makes a good teacher is how well they can take what is already in their head and successfully work to get it in yours. Someone who thinks outside the box to find new ways to not only relay information but instill passion in the process. It is someone who, quite literally, makes sense.

Like Ezra in our scripture today. Talk about a steep learning curve. Ezra was a priest living in post-exile Jerusalem, and he had a tough job ahead of him. Not long before, God's people had returned from their generation in Babylonian exile, only to find their beloved home in rubble. And as they labored to rebuild the city, they also worked to rebuild their culture, their identity. All those years in a foreign land had led them to forget who they were as God's people and the source of what bound them together. It was going to take a lot of work to make things right. Some serious schooling.

So they gathered in the square in front of their newly rebuilt temple, and Ezra pulled out one of the large scrolls of the Torah and started reading. Now there are a number of things about the way scripture tells us this that kind of jump out at us. For one thing, it was a big deal because everyone who was someone was there. Men, women and children. Specific individuals mentioned by name. This is church worship on Easter Sunday; a new academic year on Convocation Day, the annual board meeting. Everyone was there.

Of course, the other thing that catches our attention is that it says Ezra read out of these scrolls from early morning until midday. Now let's think about that for a second, shall we? Let's assume "early morning" – in Biblical terms, at least – is around 6am. "Midday," on the other hand, puts us somewhere at three in the afternoon. Which means that Ezra made the entire nation of people endure what amounted to a nine-hour sermon. Nine hours! And you thought your pastor got long-winded!

There's one other thing scripture mentions that we can't help but notice; something that sheds a lot of light on why this event was so important:

*They read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation.
They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.*

On one level this highlights an important logistical move Ezra had to make. See, the scriptures were written in Hebrew, the Israelites' native tongue. But after living for over a generation in Babylon, God's people had adopted the language of their captors, which was Aramaic. And it was nothing like Hebrew. So as he's reading these scrolls to the people for nine hours, Ezra's having to do some pretty nifty real-time translation – nifty *and* necessary. After all, reading those scrolls in original Hebrew, even though that's what they were written in, would not have helped all those people in the least. They wouldn't have understood a thing.

Actually, I think I know what this might have been like. Back in the months between college and my first job, I served as a missionary in Hiroshima, Japan. We held our Sunday morning worship services in the house of a Japanese pastor. And, as you'd expect, everything was in Japanese. Scripture was read in Japanese. Hymns were sung in Japanese. Prayers were spoken in Japanese. *I* didn't know Japanese! I knew a few words and phrases, but I was lost. I was getting very little out of the worship service. And that's when the missionary sitting next to me – a fellow American who'd been there for two years and was fluent in Japanese – that's when he'd lean over and interpret the important parts. He helped give some of that worship service meaning, by doing nothing more than speaking the language and helping it make sense.

In fact, if we fast-forwarding to the New Testament for a minute, that's really what the day of Pentecost was all about, wasn't it? There the disciples were gathered together, Jesus noticeably absent from their midst, trying to determine what to do next. There was a whole big world outside their Jewish one, and they knew they were called to spread the gospel – but how? And that's when the Holy Spirit entered the scene and gave them the most practical skill to fulfill that calling: the ability to speak different languages. Now they could go to the Greeks and tell them about Jesus. Now they could enter the depths of northern Africa to preach the gospel. Now they could cover the vast Middle eastern world, with all its various clans and dialects, and share the Good News.

Language truly does make a difference when it comes to helping people understand where they've been and where they are going. And for those Israelites on that celebrated day, it was a big deal as they returned to their homeland after an extended absence. They needed something to ground them, something to remind them of who they were and where they came from. And in his nine-hour sermon that's precisely what Ezra gave them.

But the thing is, Ezra was doing a lot more here than just translating some words as inscribed on the scroll in his hand. He also had to read it to them so they knew how their story fit in with the people's story; how it all made sense. He had to read it so those words could become active and alive in the minds and hearts of the people who heard them.

So what takes place in the 8th chapter of Nehemiah is more than just an act of translation – it is the greatest act of faith and love. And it's interesting how the people reacted to all of this, isn't it – with weeping? Ezra's words spoke to both their minds and their hearts. It brought them closer to God than returning to their homeland ever could have.

It's kind of hard for those of us in the modern world to understand the joy those Israelites were feeling. Having access to the Bible today is as easy as pulling the hard cover off our living room bookshelf, or downloading an iPhone or Blackberry app, or logging onto one of the hundreds you can find online. There are thousands of devotion books with selected scripture readings; there are websites that will email you passages every day. It's hard for us today to relate to the immense joy and elation those people felt when they heard scripture read in their native tongue for the very first time.

But it wasn't just hearing the words read that got Ezra's congregation that day so excited, was it? It's one thing to have the written form of God's revelation in your presence; it's another thing to have that revelation come alive inside of you. To "understand" the Bible means, quite literally, to "stand under" it – to place yourself under its authority, to take it personally, to allow your life to be shaped by it and to give it your trust and confidence. And that's not always an easy thing in this world of ours, especially when so many people see it different ways, see it saying different things, see it communicating all kinds of truths.

That's why it always helps to go back to the source, doesn't it? In theme-park saturated Florida there's a relative newcomer you may have heard about. It's called "The Holy Land Experience," and it bills itself as a historical and archaeological Bible come to life. It's quite a setup – it features the great Temple of Jerusalem and the Qumran Caves on its hundred or so acres. Which is interesting, given that in the real Israel the two are separated by a long bus ride through the desert. As fellow Presbyterian minister Joanna Adams put it, "The admission fee is \$35 for adults and \$20 for children, and for that you get to enjoy all the pleasures of the sacred sites and none of the hassles of actually being there." No need to worry about pesky conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians, you see. Inside the temple the blonde-haired, blue-eyed actors and dancers don ancient-looking garb and sing Hebrew classics like "There is a Redeemer" and "Our God is an Awesome God." And if you get hungry, all you need to do is stop by the Oasis Palms Cafe and grab a Goliath burger for just \$5.95.¹

Somehow I don't see Disney losing any business to this! But that's the problem, isn't it? We can tell when something is not authentic; we know when what we're presented with is just a reflection of the real thing. It's not about being entertained at places with some loose connections – and I mean "loose" – to the actual Biblical story. Time and time again scripture is used to support and say things that are not at all what it was intended to do. That's not how the scriptures come alive in us; that's not how they "make sense."

1 From "Stone to Bread" by Joanna Adams, *Journal For Preachers*, Vol. XXXIII No. 2, Lent 2010, pg. 15.

The word of God makes sense to us when it is experienced in community – when it is read and interpreted among people of faith. When the choir sings a stirring anthem based on the Psalms. When a Sunday school class wrestles with the lesson for the week. When a group of Beacons cram into the Lighthouse living room and talk to God. When church members comfort other church members. All of these are reflections of the word of God coming alive in us and being more than just some print on a page.

So when we seek to understand the Bible together, we are doing more than simply trying to understand what the words mean. We are asking them to come alive in us; we are "standing under" Scripture's view of God and humanity and sacred history. We are giving it not only the insight of our brains, but also the devotion of our hearts.

That is how we live and grow as people of faith – teaching each other, learning from each other, loving one another, as we listen to what God is saying to us. And not just as individuals, but perhaps even more so as a community – gathered together to experience God's language once again. Just like it did with Ezra, just like it did with the people. And sometimes it will move us to tears, too – not just when we understand it, but when it *makes sense*. Thanks be to God – AMEN.