



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

760 East Broad Street • Columbus Ohio 43205 • (614) 221-6552 • fax (614) 221-5722 • [www.bspsc.org](http://www.bspsc.org)

### “Worship!”

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10  
January 27, 2019

Reverend Ann Palmerton  
Broad Street Presbyterian Church  
Columbus, OH

Introduction to Scripture: A long exile in Babylon ends. The people return to Jerusalem. They look to Nehemiah and Ezra to help them rebuild the city and restore worship. This is the backdrop for our reading from Nehemiah, chapter 8...

Something special happens when we gather in one place for worship. But last Sunday, that didn't happen. And for good reason. Level 2 and Level 3 snow emergencies kept us home. Last Sunday morning Broad Street's Leadership Team was awake at 5:00 a.m.! We watched weather reports. I suggested we could open in time for 11:00 worship. We took a vote. The majority decided to close for the whole morning. Later, my spouse hacked ice off the windshield. We slipped and slid outside. The majority made a good call.

If you missed having worship last week, think what it was like for the exiles. Tribes exiled generations ago return to a homeland they have never seen. Their Babylonian captors discouraged them from worship and from keeping kosher. Gathering for worship in public is a strange, new experience for all of them. If you are grateful to be back in worship, imagine how the exiles felt when they returned.

The Bible is full of speeches and directions about how to worship God. But we don't often get a picture in our scripture reading of how worship actually takes place. Our reading from Nehemiah offers a window into ancient Jewish worship, which in turn informs our Christian worship.<sup>1</sup>

In Nehemiah, God's people worship together. They all gather in the square in front of the Water Gate. It's a public area where everyone is welcome, even those considered unclean. The priest, Ezra, speaks to an intergenerational group of men, women, and children. They listen to Ezra and feel joy in their return; joy in being together. They rediscover the joy of the Lord as their strength.

Last Tuesday, we held a memorial service here at church for Jo Cooperrider. Jo had been part of the Broad Street community for 59 years. She sang in the choir and served as a wedding coordinator. At the service, several of you commented how good it felt to gather again for worship after missing last weekend. That is an important reminder for all of us - there are many things we can do on our own, but being a worshipping community isn't one of them.

Thinking about this, I remember a story told by old time evangelist Dwight L. Moody. A friend of Moody's visited him one night. As they talked, the friend made a case for being a Christian without going to worship. Moody didn't say a word. Instead, he stepped forward, to the fireplace. He picked up tongs, and drew out a coal. He held it up for his friend to see. It slowly went out.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Rev. W. Carter Lester, Jr., Co-pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Pottstown, PA, for his article in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1, pp. 266-270, which shapes this sermon.

Life without God can be good. Life with God can be even better. Life with God brings another dimension to our lives. We experience the joy of the Lord as our strength. After church, a man says he and his family are moving so he can take another job. He starts to say how much worshipping here has meant to him. He chokes up and can't finish. A few moments go by. Then he simply says "Thank you." We do not always know how much worship means to us, how much we rely on worship to gather us in, to gather our lives up with others, until we experience disruption. Together we are the body of Christ. We have gifts to share with one another and this community. Worship is something we all do together.

Here at Broad Street we try to express welcome and hospitality in worship. We celebrate God's presence with us, God's nearness. But what about the holiness of God's transcendence, that is, the awesomeness of God, the energy and urgency and mystery of God? How often do we come to church expecting something to happen? Unfortunately, often, when nothing happens our expectations are met!

Writer Annie Dillard describes what worship might look like if we were to approach it as the people in Nehemiah do:

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? ...It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake some day and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.<sup>2</sup>

I wonder what it was like to be in the Jerusalem crowd that day. Ezra steps up on a wooden platform. He reads from the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. He reads from early morning into the afternoon. To us this sounds like the longest, most boring worship service ever! If you find yourself sleepy during this sermon, just imagine standing for a scripture marathon in the hot sun!

You'd think those worshippers might need a crash helmet. After six hours of standing and listening to scripture, including long lists of genealogies, surely the people are at risk to faint!

But they don't faint. And if they could have used crash helmets it would have been for a very different reason. Their worship experience transforms them. They don't fall down, or asleep, they perk up. They don't pass out from boredom, they cry out – literally. After Ezra completes his reading, all the people weep (v. 9).

In our lives we cry for all sorts of reasons – physical pain, emotional distress, joy. The common spring from which all our tears flow is poignancy. We cry when we are deeply moved.

The people hear the Word and they weep. We aren't told exactly why. Maybe sorrow fills their hearts for not living up to God's expectations. Maybe they weep from regret for years spent in exile. Or maybe their tears are tears of joy, as they hear scripture read again and sense deep down the joy of the Lord as their strength.

God's Word does all of that. The Bible gives us a lens to look at the world and our lives through God's eyes. Our weekly scripture readings offer us God's presence and love during times when we feel alone or abandoned. Scripture also has an uncanny way of piercing our self-satisfaction and arrogance. The Word of God is poignant!

---

<sup>2</sup> Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41.

When was the last time you wept in church? Some of you tell us you cry every week. Some shed internal tears, which no one can see. When was the last time you felt emotion stir as you listened to music or sat in silence, or heard scripture read or a sermon preached? When God's spirit moves in our midst and connects head and heart, tears may flow, grace flows down.

Back to Tuesday's memorial service. After Jo's long journey with Alzheimer's, those of us who knew her carry a mixture of grief and relief in the wake of her death. During the memorial service, when our soloist sang *How Great Thou Art* and hit the high notes, when we heard the melody of the Widor Toccata with that dramatic descending bass line, tears welled up. We felt moved.

Years ago, I was in Miller Chapel, in worship, during the first week of my first semester at Princeton Theological Seminary. A woman named Suzanne Rudiselle was preaching. I began to cry. It was the first time I had ever heard a woman's voice from the pulpit. Decades later, I understand the tears. I cried because I finally could imagine myself in ministry. I cried because it felt like I was coming home. I felt moved; I cried from joy.

When we offer who we are to God, God works within us in ways we can't often detect - quiet, subversive, constant. God works within us and changes us over time.

After worship, a man talks about his son on drugs. A woman describes her struggle with chronic pain. Another person shares the progress of a dying friend. Worship links us with God's story, and week by week, with one another's stories, as God moves in our lives.

Next Sunday we will have two options for worship. Here at Broad Street at 8:45, and at neighboring Bethany Presbyterian Church at 10:45. Bethany is an historic African American church, just two blocks north. We've been invited to worship together in celebration of Bethany's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Come next Sunday; hear the Word read and preached in Bethany's sanctuary, and enjoy refreshments together afterwards. Experience the familiar and the unfamiliar and the joy of the Lord.

On that special day in Nehemiah, after worship, the people eat and drink together. They rejoice greatly; they feel - they know - the joy of the Lord is their strength.

No matter what is going on in the world or in our lives, the joy of the Lord gives us strength. Worship invites us to soak up that joy, to bask in that strength. This is a place to receive God's good word, to know, deep down, that the joy of the Lord is your strength. Amen.