

I imagine that every single person gathered here today remembers exactly where he or she was standing when you first saw images on the television of American Airlines flight 11 careening into the World Trade Center's North Tower. It happened at 8:46 in the morning. Like many others on the West Coast, I had gotten up, showered, grabbed a cup of coffee and headed to work, utterly oblivious to what had happened 3,000 miles away. I had, earlier that year gone to New York to visit a friend and had seen from her apartment in Greenwich those majestic buildings cut into the sky like steel sequoias in an urban forest – the thought that the Manhattan skyline could ever be altered by their removal had never entered into the realm of possibility. When I arrived in my classroom that morning, all of my students were gathered around my radio, fixated. We all remember how we felt that morning. Some of you, no doubt, know people who were lost amid the smoke and rubble and terror. It was a day that will always mark time for our country. A day that perhaps for the first time since Pearl Harbor we, collectively as Americans, caught a glimpse of our nation's mortality. And it was terrifying, and incredibly confusing.

It may seem odd to invoke that memory on an ordinary, cold January morning – but I do so because our imaginations are impoverished when it comes to understanding the world of this morning's Old Testament reading from Nehemiah. We have no adequate cultural analog at our disposal to help us understand what it might have meant for Israel to witness the destruction of the temple in 587. To be sure, the destruction of the Twin Towers made us feel *vulnerable* and afraid. The destruction of the Temple made Israel feel *utterly destroyed*. One biblical scholar puts it this way: "All that was visible and institutional, all that seemed theologically guaranteed by [God's] faithfulness, all that gave symbolic certitude and coherence, all that was linked to significance, identity, and security, was gone." Crumbled and burned in the fire.

Centuries earlier, God had given the Israelites wonderful gifts: a land, security, abundance, and prosperity. The memory of those gifts and that covenant relationship with God formed the very fabric of Israelite society. It kept them bonded to God, reliant upon God and responsive to God.

But as years passed, the people grew careless and cynical about their faith. "Prosperity causes amnesia," writes Walter Brueggeman. People with amnesia forget who they are, what they are supposed to do, or to whom they are accountable. This goes a long way toward explaining how the Israelites were conquered and carted off to Babylonia, where they endured half a century of exile.

This morning we pick up the story several years after this critical event in the life of God's people. Those who destroyed Jerusalem, the Babylonian Empire rose to power dramatically, but within 50 years, they were dramatically overrun by the more powerful Assyrians. It was an Assyrian King, Cyrus, who allowed Israel to return to the land from which they had been sent into exile. The book that Carter read from tells the story of

Nehemiah, an administrator who led his people after exile and petitioned the King to allow the Israelites to rebuild their lives, beginning with the city walls.

It is difficult to imagine what it would be like, after being exiled from your home for over fifty years - to come back for the purpose of reconstructing what could only be a distant memory. Where does one begin? How does one attempt to reclaim an identity that has been lost in the wake of a cataclysmic event? How do a people recover from a sort of cultural amnesia brought about by the destruction of everything that once held meaning?

Nehemiah believed that a good way to begin was to lead the people in a series of renewal projects that included the reconstruction of the temple and city walls. But when the work was finished, the people still looked toward the temple with downcast eyes. They had a place to worship and they had the safety of the walls, but their situation was still bleak. The Assyrians taxed them heavily – external enemies threatened them and internal divisions weakened them. On the outside, things were in place, but they had not recovered their memory. The people gather together in the town square, but they have no direction.

So they ask Ezra to fetch a scroll he'd brought with him from Babylonia. The scroll contained the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures, and as he opened them and began to read the stories: stories of creation, of the great flood, the calling of Abraham and the covenant promise, of Joseph and the migration to Egypt and God's releasing the people from bondage. He read the law, which contains God's instructions for community.

The law nourishes the soul. Ezra opens the book of the law and an amazing thing happens – all of the people stand. The stories were written in Hebrew, but the Israelites were speaking Aramaic, the language of the Assyrians – so he translates the law into the people's language. Meanwhile, thirteen priests spread themselves out among the people in order to ensure that they understand what was being read.

The people in Jerusalem were so spiritually malnourished, so desperately longing for connections between what Ezra was reading and their own particular circumstances that they spent half of the day gathered in the town square listening.

You know how that feels, right?

We see in this narrative what it is like for a people to get caught up in a story. These former exiles began to understand where they were in the story that God was writing. They had wandered so far and forgotten so much. The loss of a story resulted in the loss of a community. Scripture held up a mirror to the people and they saw a giant gap between the covenant God had called them to and the lives they were actually living. And so they wept.

But Ezra did not read the law so his people would become mired in failure and frustration. "Do not weep," he says. "This is a day of remembrance. This is a day of celebration because we are told in this story that we are God's people and that nothing can separate us from God's love".

Nehemiah's account ends with the people celebrating and sharing gifts of food and wine, because their half century of amnesia had come to an end. Their memories had been

resurrected. They could face the hard work of reconstruction that lie ahead assured of God's presence, love, guidance, and strength.

What does this strange little scene in an oft-neglected Old Testament history have to say to us? Well, while there are obvious differences, I can't help but see a parallel between Nehemiah's campaign to rebuild the temple and our recently completed renovation of this sanctuary. The temple was a source of pride and hope – the very symbol of God's presence with the people. To see it in ruin or disrepair was a source of great anxiety. Perhaps our building and décor committees would say that they were more anxious *during* the restoration process than they were before, but we all agreed that something had to be done.

In contrast to the opulent temples of Solomon and Herod, Nehemiah's temple was simple – something built by the people. This sanctuary also is the people's building. The history of this building is indelibly linked to the history and people of Tuckahoe Presbyterian Church. They and you built and continue to build this place of worship. It was your vision and your money that caused the realization. And the result is something beautiful – something that can be a source of hope. A sacred space.

But the story of Nehemiah is not the story of the reconstruction of a wall or a temple. It is a story about the reconstruction of a people. When Ezra reads the story and the people see that it is *their story* – that is the moment when God's people are reborn. And it's a painful birth. But like all births it is a moment of hope and joy.

We have a lot of challenges to face. We as Christians in a rapidly changing culture are being asked to realize that things are not the way they once were. Church growth solutions that worked in the past are not going to work today. Throughout our capital improvement process, I heard folks say on more than one occasion that our slow but steady membership decline is going to turn around for us once the sanctuary is completed. Once we have a beautiful place to worship again, we will attract new members. I certainly am not criticizing those of you who expressed those kinds of sentiments – it was true and a reasonable hope at one point.

Perhaps Nehemiah had a similar hope. But there is a difference between building a temple and building a people. Now lest you think that I would make the latter all about the preaching, I want to point out that all that Ezra did was point his people toward the sources that made their lives intelligible.

This sanctuary is part of our history. It is part of who we are and we should be grateful for it. But the story of Tuckahoe Presbyterian Church is not the story of a building. It is the story of a people who join together to be reminded that the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the central event of their story. We are here because we believe that in Jesus Christ, God has brought good news to the poor; proclaimed release to the captives and given sight to the blind. He has loosened the chains of oppression, and proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor.

That story is your story. When we live that story, we experience God in our midst. If the loss of narrative signals the loss of community, then it is only in telling each other our

stories and seeing that our stories are in fact the stories that God is telling through us and has been telling in scripture that we can be the kind of community called the Church.

But it is not always easy to understand the story. Ezra sends priests into the crowd to “explain the meaning”. So we need each other to understand the story. I can’t tell you how impressed I’ve been by the people in our congregation who’ve undertaken the Disciple Bible Study. Two such people, whom I work with on a regular basis, are Pam Dickerson and Sherry Flournoy. There are priests in our midst that can help us understand the story.

We are beginning to rebuild the temple, friends. My hope is that 2010 can be a year in which we look to building the community. Get involved in a bible study. Do works of love. In everything you do, tell our story. Tell it like you believe that it’s true. In the telling you will discover that it *is* true.