*Almighty and ever living God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for this parish family. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Good Morning!

Having a couple at least one more Bible scholars around than usual has been less intimidating that you'd think. Actually, it's been really great to have Matthew DeLaney around to help us all get a handle on the overall sweep and narrative of the Old Testament, especially because I think we've been able to work together to help folks get just a touch more interested in what's in their Bibles. Certainly, we've enjoyed his class over these past few weeks and look forward to Dr. Bill Lyon's own deeper dive into the Biblical texts starting next week. But some of us have already started reading ahead a bit. I'm especially proud of St. Barbara's Guild and the Daughters of the King, who have been so kind with their invitations for me to come and read Scripture with the groups. I know I have had a great time with them, and I pray they have enjoyed the time we've had in study.

One of the things I think is true of so many teachers, and certainly teachers of the Scripture is the exhilaration felt at that moment of delight in a student's eyes when a new connection is made, or an epiphany is realized, or some deep truth is revealed. It has been gratifying to observe that happen in so many of our formational offerings lately. I don't bring that up that up to toot collective horns (ok well maybe just a little) but to maybe give a little bit of insight into one of the more stirring elements of today's lessons, how even our own study produces a lively response just like in what we've read today.

In our lesson from Nehemiah this morning, we are coming into one of the most heartening stories of the whole Bible: Israel's return from their long exile. Put shortly, Nehemiah was a big part of that return, and his main job was rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem while Ezra was set towards the renewal of worship at the temple. In today's reading, we got to enjoy the a pivotal moment in the Scripture, when the gathered Israel, so long kept from being able to offer the fullness of their worship, so long kept from being able to fully enjoy their Scriptures recited and interpreted openly among the people, when the gathered Israel could hear once again the Covenant their people had made with God from the time of Moses. For so many of them it was the first time they had heard that which made them special among all the peoples of the earth. It was the first time they had come to know how much God was searching for them, waiting upon them, and drawing them to him so that they could do what He called them to do. Nehemiah's text is filled with emotion, perhaps even catharsis if a reader had been following the storyline thus far. Upon hearing the Law and some interpretation thereof, we're told that everyone there worships by prostrating themselves before the Lord. The text tells us that the people weep at the recitation of the Law given to Moses, such was their collective heart moved by what I would imagine is a renewed sense of protection, vocation, a renewed sense of who they are among the peoples, and what they have to offer the world. God's people were coming to terms, for the first time in a very long time, with the fact that God loves them, wants them to let the other people know that God loves everything He's created, and wants to draw everything back to Him just like it was in that cool garden of ancient Eden.

It's an absolutely huge moment in the Bible. You'll notice that the citations, the little reference numbers we use to quickly locate Bible verses, is broken up with commas. That's because the verses the lectionary removes are filled with the most impossible ancient names. This mercy to our faithful readers has the unfortunate effect of veiling how great the scale of the gathering is. The point is clear: everyone is here.

But I've got some bad news. I don't want to take away from this powerful moment of return, rebuilding, and renewal, but Nehemiah and his fellows don't exactly get to roll up to the Temple and see the priests hanging out super hard with God's presence. The story, sadly, goes the way that most of our Old Testament narratives go: great moments of *hope* punctuated with great moments of *nope*. The people who had enthusiastically heard the word of God are quickly found in dissolute living, and once again abandon their calling. Nehemiah was pretty bummed. And when people thought about what was happening with people once again abandoning their faithfulness to God, they started to think that maybe they hadn't learned what they needed to learn about themselves in Exile. Or maybe, and this is important to understand the New Testament, maybe exile hadn't ended. Maybe there was something deep inside of the people Israel, something that kept them from keeping their covenant with God. Maybe the true exile was the human heart's alienation from the heart of God because of sin and death.

For all the rebuilding of the wall, for all the renewal of the temple, what needed reconstruction and rebirth was the heart. Every heart. This would weigh on Israel's teachers. But God wasn't really done with Israel. Remember Advent and Christmas; Israel was preparing for a Messiah, and it would take God himself to fix the issue. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus Christ. He was presented to the Temple and consecrated as an inheritor of Israel's vocation to God. He was baptized by John in the river Jordan to fulfill all righteousness. He began to preach around the synagogues and offered the Good News of the true end of exile. When he unrolled the scroll from the prophet Isaiah, when he sang that beautiful text from the sixty-first chapter, he was indeed announcing that God was intent on fixing the thing that had been broken all along. He wasn't coming to upend the geopolitics of the age, nor offer the best way to overinterpret the law of Moses. Rather, he was coming to bring news that the poor would finally be taken care of. He was coming to restore the sight of those blinded by sin so that they might see God. He was coming to unbind those captive by transgression so that they might be free to love and serve God. He was, he is the anointed one, the Messiah. And he brought backup: the Holy Spirit that hovered over the waters of creation, strengthened the noble men and women of Israel, and moved the mouths of their prophets, that Holy Spirit was with him and ready to begin the work of building a new Kingdom, a new Jerusalem of the a new Eden, and New Creation.

And all of that was meant to take root in the heart of every human being. Remember when I told you that hope was often followed by nope in the Bible? You know when that pattern finally stops? When death's sting is robbed of its poison by Jesus Christ's rising to new life on the third day. Now we can end the exile of our hearts. Now we can have our hearts rebuilt and renewed. Now we can do what Nehemiah and everyone around him wanted to do all those years ago: we can be the people of God, held together not by the bonds of blood but by the tether of the Spirit. As Paul wrote:

*For in the one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*

My dear friends, while I hope every time we open the Bible to read a lesson that our hearts would be stirred towards faithfulness, I don't expect the room to weep and prostrate. But if nothing else, I pray that you are encouraged by how enthusiastic this congregation has already been to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest what God has given to his people in the Scripture. I pray that in our work as the body, with all of us committed to the various tasks we are given by the Spirit, that we would always have our hearts open to God's renewal of our hearts just as Christ dwells among us. I pray that we would be reminded that:

The law of the Lord is perfect

and revives the soul; \*

the testimony of the Lord is sure

and gives wisdom to the innocent.

The statutes of the Lord are just

and rejoice the heart; \*

the commandment of the Lord is clear

and gives light to the eyes.

To God be all Glory. From age to age. Amen.