Sermon & Annual Meeting Address **Nehemiah 8.1-3, 5-6, 8-10**
January 27, 2019 **Psalm 19**
Epiphany 3C **I Corinthians 12.12-31a**
The Rev. Gary R. Brower, PhD **Luke 4.14-21**

Some 2600 years ago, a couple of Artaxerxes's (father and son), the rulers of the Persian Empire, sent two men, Ezra and Nehemiah, to Jerusalem to oversee the rebuilding of that city. It had been several decades since Cyrus after defeating the Babylonians had issued the edict that allowed the Jewish exiles to return to their homeland. In keeping with imperial policy, client states—like Judah—should be restored to their pre-exilic condition. The problem, of course, was that no-one in Judah remembered what that was! During the years that the Jews — mostly the upper-crust, spiritual and political leaders — had been in Babylon, the "center of gravity" of Jewish life, national and religious, had re-located there. Those Jews who had remained in Palestine had lost touch with much that had previously defined them—they became the precursors of the biblical "Samaritans". Hence, the necessity of the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The Persians, of course, had political motives for helping Judah/Jerusalem rebuild; their enemies, the Egyptians and Greeks, were eager to expand their influence. So it was in Persia's interests that Jerusalem be a strong outpost in their defence efforts. To be a "strong outpost" implied a strong infrastructure and a strong, resilient population. The oversight of strengthening the infrastructure fell to Nehemiah; reading the books of Ezra and Nehemiah gives one a flavor of the building programs he oversaw. The resilience, the spiritual strength, of the people was Ezra's responsibility.

Ezra's first act, upon arrival in Jerusalem, was to call the residents together and to remind them of their spiritual roots and responsibilities. The people gathered and Ezra read the "book of the law of Moses" to them. Their response was, perhaps, unusual: they wept. Why? Some scholars think it was because the people recognized what they had been missing all those decades; they hadn't known, or remembered, how to be faithful to God, to the covenant. Ezra's reading, then, wasn't meant to be critical — no finger-shaking — but empowering: "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (8.10).

I find that this account from post-exilic Jerusalem resonates a bit for us at Good Shepherd, especially now. No, I'm not suggesting that we've been in exile without any linkages to our roots. And, certainly, I am not going to ask that you "bow your faces to the ground" (8.5) while I read from "early morning until midday" (8.3). But, given all that has gone on the last few years, for this congregation, there are some points of contact — both sorrowful and encouraging. And it is those that I want to address, using those respective responsibilities of Nehemiah and Ezra as a framework.

Nehemiah's responsibility, I mentioned, was infrastructure. It was no simple task for Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem; indeed he was sent to Jerusalem at least three times over several decades to oversee the endeavor! Likewise, taking care of our infrastructure is no simple, brief, project. To be sure, we have started the "rebuilding" — thinking of the work done in the children's area last year and the replacement of some of our heating/air-conditioning equipment, but there is more that screams for attention. Yes, some of the HVAC equipment has been replaced, but more needs replacing, and relatively soon. Late last fall, we had a major sewer line burst downstairs damaging a couple of rooms, and insurance will only cover a portion of the costs. Our carpet throughout the building has seen better days, as has the paint in a number of rooms. We recognize that there is a need for some better security.

All that said, we do have a marvelous plant! It is a resource of which we all can be proud! We have dedicated volunteers who labor long to improve the landscaping (THANKS, Renee Tschetter and helpers), as well as tending to the more "cosmetic" needs of the interior (THANKS, David McLaughry, Marge Pegula, Whit Hill, Jim Wolfe, and numerous others). Nehemiah would be jealous! The beauty and utility of our building means that it is an attractive place for outside groups. You might be surprised by how much this place is filled throughout the week! It is good stewardship of our resources, but that usage puts a toll on the plant (as I've mentioned), as well as our human resources! THANKS to Kathy Hunter who labors diligently to keep the building lively, AND to make sure that not too many toes are stepped on by other feet!

The physical infrastructure was one half of the task of *Team Nehemiah/Ezra*. While Nehemiah tended to the physical rebuilding of Jerusalem, Ezra gathered the people to re-school them in the Law — that is, their spiritual underpinnings. I certainly don't see Good Shepherd in quite the same tatters that Ezra found in Jerusalem! Indeed there is a LOT of "spirituality" in this place! As we are experiencing this morning, have a music program that is, simply put, amazing! Our choir receives rave reviews (THANKS, Connie Branton and singers!). Our contemporary groups augment the 10:00am service and undergird the the 6:00pm service (THANKS, DeeDee Atwood and musicians!). Our worship is enriched by the commitment of the Black Sheep and Bell Choirs (THANKS, Neal Wegener, Marti Deihl and Tricia Hartman, Sheep and Ringers!). And working with most of these groups is our amazing organist/pianist Stephen Fiess. We are supported in our worship by such committed Altar Guild members, Flower Ministry, Lay Eucharistic Ministers, Lectors and Acolytes — Y'ALL ROCK!! All of these are gifts we may take for granted . . . but cannot.

Beyond the music are the other groups and ministries that make Good Shepherd a deeply spiritual place. Monday's "Book Group" and Tuesday's "Faith Club" reflect a vibrant concern for breadth of understanding. The Prayer Chain and the Men's Group's prayer list keep our parish concerns before the throne of grace. Did I say "Men's Group"? What an amazing, long-term, ministry of this congregation. Aside from their mutual care for, and fellowship with, each other, they set up tables (like for today!), they put up/tear down equipment for the Pumpkin Patch and Music for a Mission, and attend to a myriad of other

things we may take for granted (THANKS, Pete Roden and all the men of that group!). And, of course, as is the case with some of our other ministries, the children's and youth education are enviable. (THANKS Sue LeFant, Rachel Whipp and your teachers and advisors!).

Our ministry extends beyond this wonderful campus! Almost every week our Lay Eucharistic Visitors take communion to members of our congregation who cannot be physically present with us. Not only do these folks carry consecrated bread and wine, but they also, through their visits and conversations, carry our concerns and connections. (THANKS to Greg Bell, who oversees the Visitors — and to the visitors!) In addition to those sacramental visits, the 'presence" provided by many of congregation who simply sit and talk with folks at home, or in hospitals, is a wonderful extension of the healing ministry of Christ that is all of ours to bear.

"In-reach" does not "sum up" our care for others. Our Outreach Committee was recently visited by a member of the Bishop's Staff who was astounded by what we do in serving the wider community. Whether it is St. Clare's, St. Francis Center, Covenant Cupboard, Music with a Mission, the Pumpkin Patch or any number of other means of extending our care to the world, we have a rich legacy! (THANKS to ALL of those who coordinate and participate in these critical extensions of Christ's care for the marginalized!)

And, I would be remiss if I didn't recognize all that goes on "behind the scenes" to make sure that Good Shepherd can do ministry as it does. I've already mentioned Kathy Hunter, our amazing Parish Administrator. She possesses a wealth of knowledge, experience, and compassion upon which I rely — and which has kept me from making serious mistakes. She has been supported by a wonderful cadre of volunteers! (THANKS to you all!) DeeDee Atwood, also previously mentioned for her musical acumen, in her role as Communications Director, labors valiantly to keep our presence visible — both internally through newsletters, and externally through Facebook and other "marketing" venues. Those, too, who work with our finances are critically important. We all rely on the skills and concern they bring to their work. (THANKS to our Treasurer, Greg Bell, our bookkeeping and accounting staff Charlotte Stasko and Marjie Rodgers, and Ken White and the counters!) And last, but certainly not least, are the dedicated folks who make up the Wardens and Vestry, overseeing ALL that goes on here. (THANKS to you all; you are a gift!)

Clearly, there is a LOT of great stuff going on at Good Shepherd! It is this vitality that differentiates us from Jerusalem of the fifth century BCE. What we share with Jerusalem, however, is the need, the call from God, to recognize that rebuilding is demanded of us. The fact that I am standing here this morning, in my role as Priest-in-Charge, is just one admission the congregation has made that it is time to re-evaluate our mission and ministries. This process can be exciting, as, together, we can see new and different possibilities before us. It can also be unnerving, as we begin to recognize that there may be aspects of who we've been that no longer serve us as they once did. It is a significant undertaking; it will demand discernment and work . . . of all of us.

But we are not without resources in this project. When Ezra and Nehemiah rebuilt Jerusalem, many of the temple treasures that had been taken by the Babylonians were returned to them; they were able to build upon a rich heritage. We have a rich heritage too, in the memories, the experiences, and the varied spiritual gifts represented in all of you, regardless of length of time at Good Shepherd, regardless of age. As Paul reminded us in our reading from 1 Corinthians, we all have gifts necessary for the healthy functioning of the church: (using the translation known as *The Message*) "we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it" (12.18).

Rebuilding, however, takes more than a rich heritage and spiritual gifts. It takes investment. Ezra and Nehemiah had a funding source beyond Jerusalem itself; Artaxerxes had a vested interest in making sure that the city was rebuilt, and he provided funding. We do not have that outside source of funds; our funding—the dollars that keep our programs and staffing at their amazing level—comes from us. It is no secret that our budgetary situation is challenging. Creative and, perhaps, sacrificial solutions are ours to find. And they will be this congregation's solutions. All of our gifts will be required; we will be asked to stop out of our comfort zones to grow this church.

I want to close with a brief look at our gospel lesson. Jesus returns to Nazareth after his time in the wilderness and some initial preaching tours. He goes to synagogue, and reads from Isaiah 61. The passage refers to the Jewish practice of Jubilee, a time that came around once in a lifetime for most Jews when a big "reset" button was pushed on social and financial situations. And Jesus tells his audience that right then, in their presence, this "reset" was being pushed. In our hearing this morning, too, the "reset" is being pushed. How will we rebuild, how will we institute Jubilee?

As we answer those questions, we need keep in mind Ezra's exhortation to the residents of Jerusalem: "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength!"

Amen.