

Sermon: Beginning Again

Series:

Scripture Reading: Nehemiah 8:1-12

Date: August 16, 2026

Preacher: Rev. Susan Shaw-Meadow



I stand in the driveway in the soft morning light, my gaze steady on my father's camera. In my right hand, a red plaid lunch box; a small clutch purse hangs from my left. I am wearing a white sundress with a border of strawberries at the hem. A placard is pinned to my collar with my name and school written in block letters. My hair is pulled back in a barrette, curled for the occasion.

What is this occasion? As you might guess, it is the first day of school. The first day of first grade, my threshold to the grand adventure of formal education. Though I have no way of knowing how the experience of attending school will shape me, I trust my teachers to open vistas of understanding well beyond what my six year-old self can imagine. I look pretty proud of myself.

This week, and in the coming weeks, students of all ages are returning to classrooms that their teachers have spent a precious portion of the summer break preparing. As much as life has changed in the years since I entered first grade, this ritual is much the same. You can feel the energy and enthusiasm as school supplies are snapped up, backpacks and lunches assembled, and campuses reopen. It is a shift that affects all of us, a passage we mark in celebration, and in support of all those we send forth with encouragement for who they are, and what they will become. Returning to school, at its best, is an opportunity for growth and renewal for the entire community.

My invitation this morning is to view today's scripture from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah through the lens of renewal. It is the 5th Century Before the Common Era in Judah, a remote province of the Persian Empire. Governor Nehemiah oversees the work of restoring the Jerusalem temple and resettling the people. The temple - the beating heart of religious life for the Jewish people - had been destroyed by the Babylonians, while the people - those who survived- were dispersed or exiled. When it was finally safe to return, Nehemiah and other leaders led a series of rebuilding efforts. Nehemiah gave special focus to rebuilding and fortifying the city walls. It is along this wall, at one of the city gates, where today's reading takes place. Let's enter the scene with reverent curiosity.

Our text tells us that "the people" gather at the Water Gate. Imagine this ancient walled city with gates around the perimeter. The Water Gate is named for the springs located just outside and across from the east entrance to the Temple. In an arid climate, access to water was, and is, critical.

Men, women, and anyone “who could understand what they heard”, are gathered at the gate. Such an inclusive description is unusual, if not unique, in the Old Testament. Given the deeply patriarchal culture of ancient Israel, we are accustomed to reading “people” in Biblical texts as “men”, and if you’re like me, wondering what the women were up to. Were they included or not? In this case, women are specifically included, as are those who have understanding. This is even more interesting. The assembled crowd is not only inclusive with respect to gender, it is inclusive with respect to age. Adults and youth gather as one to receive God’s Word.

What is this Word that the people assemble to hear? It is the *Torah*, the Instruction handed down to Moses at Mt. Sinai. Notice I didn’t say Law, the translation that may be most familiar. In the Christian tradition, we are accustomed to referring to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible as the Law of Moses.

In the fall of 2016, Rabbi Neal Blumofe, Senior Rabbi at Temple Agudas Achim in Austin, taught the introductory Hebrew class at Austin Seminary. Rabbi Blumofe's sonorous baritone echoed through McMillan Hall as he chanted Hebrew prayer at the start of our early morning class. I never did master the complexities of Hebrew grammar. I like to think that the more important lessons stuck. *Torah*, our rabbi emphasized over and over again, is best translated *teaching or instruction*. Instruction in a way of life that forms its practitioners and sets them apart as people of the One God. Rather than an impossible burden - imagine having to keep all those laws! - the Torah is a great blessing. Attending to the Instruction, living the Instruction, is a primary mark of faithfulness for the Jewish people.

Let’s return to our story: The people - all ages together - receive the Instruction from early in the morning until midday. It would be as if we arrived just as Roy was opening up this morning, filled the sanctuary - from which the pews had been removed - and stood attentively, hanging on every word until the reading was complete at noontime, and there was not a seat left in any restaurant in town. We really can’t imagine it.

Who is reading the Instruction? It is Ezra the priest and scribe. In our culture of information overload and copious print resources, we may not appreciate why it would be important that priests like Ezra also be trained as scribes. When most of the population was illiterate - as much as 97% - scribes represented the educated elite. Texts were painstakingly copied and very carefully preserved so that important *words* could be communicated. Political words as in a King’s edict. Religious words, as the reading of the *Torah*.

Notice that although Ezra stands on a platform above the people - presumably so they can see and hear - he is not talking down to them. The people ask for this reading. True authority comes from God.

Did you notice the other teachers? These are the Levites who provide interpretation, ensuring that the people with understanding, well, understand. The Levites were

descendants of Jacob's son, Levi - here we are talking about men. The Levites participate in the temple leadership, assisting the priests with liturgical and ritual duties. Think associate pastor.

What we really want to know is how the people respond. They are deeply moved. They lift their arms in the air and shout "Amen! Amen!" They bow their faces to the ground. And then there is this:

Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all of the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Don't mourn or weep." They said this because all the people wept when they heard the words of the Instruction. "Go, eat rich food, and drink something sweet," ... "and send portions of this to any who have nothing ready! This day is holy to our LORD. Don't be sad, because the joy from the LORD is your strength!" (Nehemiah 8:9-10)

Wow! They got it. They understood. The people, gathered as one, received the Word and wept. Reminded of their sacred history, they wept. Reminded of their collective trauma, they wept. Sensitized to the gap between faithfulness to God, and the lives they were living, the people wept. Nehemiah interrupts the communal lament with one final instruction:

God holds all of your history, all of your memory, all of your dreams. Today is holy to the Lord, do not mourn or weep. Rejoice and be glad. Celebrate and share with those in need. The joy of the Lord is your strength!

The Exiles restore community by doing the hard, practical work of clearing the rubble, rebuilding their homes, their beloved temple, and the city of Jerusalem. They do something that is even more important - they renew their identity as People of God through the attentive reading of Torah. Spiritually recentered in the faithfulness of a God who called them by name, led them out of captivity, shepherded them through the wilderness, and promised a homecoming, God's people are equipped for an uncertain present, and for every future, knowing that God is with them every step of their journey.

Is it not the same for us? We, too, are restored and renewed as we attend to God's Word - through study, worship and devotion, and through the interpretation of God's Word in beautiful variety, in one another and in the world around us.

Most especially, we are renewed in Jesus Christ, the living Word, who is with us and for us, walking beside us, going ahead of us showing the way, taking our place in self-giving love.

Let's go forth to eat rich food and drink something sweet. Maybe hot dogs and ice cream? Let's temper our fatigue and regret with the assurance that this day - every day - is holy to the Lord. The joy of the Lord is our strength! Amen.