

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

January 26, 2025 (3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, Year C)  
Nehemiah 8:1-10

In 1977, at the height of the Cold War, Anatoly Shcharansky, a brilliant young Russian mathematician and chess player, was arrested by the KGB for his repeated attempts to emigrate to Israel. He spent thirteen years inside Soviet labor camps. What kept him going all that time? Just this: from morning to evening Shcharansky read and studied all 150 psalms. “What does this give me?” he asked in a letter: “Gradually, my feeling of great loss and sorrow changes to one of bright hopes.”

Shcharansky so cherished his book of Psalms, in fact, that when guards took it AWAY from him, he lay in the snow, refusing to move, until they returned it. During those thirteen years in prison, his wife traveled around the world campaigning for his release. Accepting an honorary degree on his behalf, she told the university audience, “In a lonely cell in Chistopol prison, locked alone with the Psalms of David, Anatoly found expression for his innermost feelings in the outpourings of the King of Israel thousands of years ago.” What kept this great man going? One thing and one thing only. The word of God.

Our lesson from Nehemiah paints one of the most VIVID IMAGES of the power of God’s Word in people’s lives that you will find ANYWHERE in ALL of literature. The people of Israel were returning to their homeland after their long exile in Babylon. Construction of the wall surrounding Jerusalem had just been completed, and the people gathered together and asked Ezra, the priest and scribe, to read them “the book of the law of Moses.”

Now if you think about it, the WAY that they gathered sounds a little familiar. They gathered to hear the Word of God READ, and it was INTERPRETED for them. It says, “They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” Kind of sounds like a sermon. They STOOD for the reading, and they prayed. They ate and they drank together, and they took an OFFERING to those in need. Are you seeing the similarities? It sounds A LOT like our OWN order of worship.

But it also says, “Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen,’ lifting up their hands.” Okay, so they weren’t LUTHERAN. I know they do that in SOME churches, but if YOU were to start shouting “Amen, Amen” during this sermon, I’d probably faint from shock.

But the congregation did MORE than say “amen” and lift their hands. Notice the way they RESPONDED to God’s Word? It says, “All the people WEPT when they heard the words of the law.” They WEPT!

WHY were they moved to tears? Well, they weren’t tears of sadness; they were tears of joy. You see, they’d been in exile in Babylon. They’d been conquered and taken away from their homeland. Some families hadn’t returned to Israel for over a hundred years. And in all that time, they were forbidden to hear the Word of God.

For Israel, generation after generation after generation had lived and died NEVER having HEARD the Word of God read to them. They’d only heard ABOUT it second-hand from their parents. Can you imagine that? So here, when they heard it read, actually HEARD it for themselves, for the first time, it TOUCHED them, it MOVED them, it brought them to TEARS! And they were EXCITED to hear it and study it. It wasn’t ENOUGH for them to study God’s Word for ONE day; they STUDIED it EVERY day of the week.

Now as a pastor, I can relate to being overwhelmed by God’s word. Every time I write a sermon for you, I think, “Where did THOSE words come from? They AREN’T MINE!” I feel like God is USING me, like Ezra, to help you get the sense of the word. And every time I sit down to write a FUNERAL sermon, it makes me WEEP, how God is USING me to help a grieving family. And every time I share COMMUNION with you, I’m OVERWHELMED, I’m almost brought to TEARS, by the PRIVILEGE of GIVING you God’s WORD, God’s LOVE, in PHYSICAL FORM. God’s word is amazing.

So, what am I saying, that you should take Israel’s example and read your Bible every day? Well, YEAH, SURE, ABSOLUTELY! If that’s your take away here, I think God would LOVE us to study his Word every day. But there’s also ANOTHER point I want to make here.

We don't really appreciate what a GIFT God's Word IS. The Bible has power and promise that no other book has.

For example, have you ever read something in your Bible that just jumped off the page to you? And you think, "Yeah. I FEEL that. I know what THAT means." Now, chances are, that passage was something you HAD SEEN before, but until THAT VERY moment in your life, the words hadn't really MEANT anything to you. You didn't NOTICE them the same way. The difference WAS, for YOU, THOSE words were FOR THIS time in your life. God's Word speaks to us as PEOPLE, with REAL lives and real emotions, JUST as we are, WHEREVER we are on our journey.

And sometimes we come across a passage that we'd underlined a long TIME ago. We know it meant something to us back THEN, but NOW we think: "I wonder why I underlined that."

And sometimes a passage that means ONE thing to us today might mean something COMPLETELY DIFFERENT to us a year from now, or even a WEEK from now.

You see, the Bible is a LIVING Word. It's NEW EVERY time we open it. It's JUST as new for us today as it was for Israel. It's new, because the Spirit MAKES it new. It's the SAME BOOK, the SAME WORDS, but TODAY it speaks to us DIFFERENTLY than it did YESTERDAY.

And it's been DOING that for THOUSANDS of years. That's the reason it's been AROUND this long. It's the ONLY book that's LASTED THIS long.

It's because it's still relevant. It has the POWER to change people's lives. This book gets INSIDE people. It CHANGES people.

Let me give you an example. Jurgen Moltmann was one of the most influential theologians of our time. Moltmann was born in Hamburg, Germany in 1926. His German upbringing was THOROUGHLY secular – no talk of faith at all. At sixteen, he idolized Albert Einstein, and looked forward to studying mathematics. He took his entrance exam to proceed with his education, but he had to go to war instead. He was drafted into the German military in 1944 and became a soldier under the Nazis. When he was ordered to the front lines, he SURRENDERED to the FIRST British soldier he met. For the next few years (1945-46), he was confined as a prisoner of war and moved from camp to camp.

During that time, Moltmann lost all hope and confidence in the German culture, because of the horrific death camps at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. He often felt he would rather have DIED than live to FACE what his nation had done. And without FAITH, he had NOTHING. He was a thoroughly broken man.

And then, one day, a well-meaning American chaplain came by, handing out English-language New Testaments to the POWs. Fortunately, Moltmann knew just enough English to make some sense of out of one of those New Testaments. There in the prison camp, Moltmann became a disciple of Jesus Christ. He would later sum it up like this, "I didn't find Christ, he found me."

After his release, Moltmann abandoned physics and went on to study theology. Now he's a theologian, whose works are read all over the world. We had to read a LOT of it in seminary. But until his death, just LAST year, Jurgen Moltmann still CARRIED that New Testament WITH him everywhere he went, as a reminder of what God can do THROUGH his word.

Everything you need to know about life is in this book. Everything you need to know about love and faith and hope is in this book. Everything you WANT to know about your purpose in this world is right here. This is a powerful document.

Its power comes from the one it's ABOUT, the one who inspired it, the one who said, "Today these words have been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus, the LIVING Word, makes THESE words into LIFE-CHANGING words.

So when you get the opportunity (and, unlike those Jews in exile, you have SO MANY OPPORTUNITIES; you probably HAVE one in your HOME), open God's word. LISTEN to what God is saying to you TODAY. It might be DIFFERENT from what you heard BEFORE. It might SURPRISE you. Okay, maybe it won't make you weep for joy. But then again, maybe it will. Amen.