

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

¹⁰ *Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."*

¹¹ *The Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for this is a sacred day. Do not grieve."*

¹² *Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.*

¹³ *On the second day of the month, the heads of all the families, along with the priests and the Levites, gathered around Ezra the scribe to give attention to the words of the Law. ¹⁴ They found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded through Moses, that the Israelites were to live in booths during the feast of the seventh month ¹⁵ and that they should proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem: "Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make booths"—as it is written.*

¹⁶ *So the people went out and brought back branches and built themselves booths on their own roofs, in their courtyards, in the courts of the house of God and in the square by the Water Gate and the one by the Gate of Ephraim. ¹⁷ The whole company that had returned from exile built booths and lived in them. From the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day, the Israelites had not celebrated it like this. And their joy was very great.*

¹⁸ *Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly. (Nehemiah 8:9-18)*

The Joy of the Lord is your Strength

Does Christmas ever seem like a big bother to you? Here we are, less than two weeks away from what most people consider to be the biggest holiday of the year. Are you enjoying yourself? Is your December filled with excitement and anticipation? Or do you have to admit that Christmas just means more stress? All those things that are supposed to be so nice really just mean more work, more expectations that you can never meet, so the holiday will inevitably end in disappointment. Is that a fair assessment of where you are again this year? If so, you may be one of those people who laments the loss of meaning in Christmas. You may think that we spend too much time and too much money on this holiday. And I will admit, there's a part of me that is very sympathetic to that point of view. But then we come to our Old Testament lesson for today – a lesson that I doubt many of us know well. The heart of this lesson is joy. Our reading from Nehemiah goes back to an Old Testament holiday that was celebrated in some ways that are similar to the ways we celebrate Christmas. It reminds us why God gives us holidays like Christmas: **the joy of the Lord is your strength.**

I.

Where does that joy come from? God gives it and it wells up in our hearts as we see what he has done for us. It has real practical benefits as we struggle with our priorities and as we beat ourselves up because once again we've allowed ourselves to get caught up in the materialism and the emptiness of our society's celebration. **The joy of the Lord is your strength. It defeats sorrow and guilt.**

Nehemiah is one of the very last books of the Old Testament to be written. There are two key men in this book, Nehemiah, the governor of Judea and Ezra, a teacher and preacher – a rabbi. For hundreds of years, the children of Israel had been independent. But they turned away from God so he sent enemies to conquer them and take the people into exile. Then seventy years after Jerusalem was destroyed, God brought his people back. He allowed them to rebuild Jerusalem and a very small, humble version of the temple of Solomon. They were no longer an independent state. The Persians ruled them. But they were home.

The events in our reading for today took place almost a hundred years after the first exiles returned. The return had not been the total success that the Jewish people hoped it would be. Ancient enemies made life difficult. Work on the temple started and then stopped for years, and had to be restarted again. It took a long time to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Worst of all, in spite of all that had happened to them, they continued

their pattern of starting out as faithful to the Lord and then slipping into sin. Now, unlike before the exile, they didn't worship idols. But they didn't follow God's commands consistently either.

So in this reading the whole people has assembled in Jerusalem for a holiday the Bible calls the Feast of Trumpets. It usually falls in September on our calendar and it is generally thought of as the Jewish New Year. Why had they called this assembly? To remind God's people of the covenant he had made with them. They built a huge platform in one of the city squares and Ezra stood there and read the books of Moses to them. While he read, the people began to weep. Why? Because they had forgotten what God had commanded them. When the people heard Ezra read what God had said, they couldn't help but reflect on how they had continued this same pattern of falling away and inattention to God and his word for a hundred years after returning from exile. They wept in guilt and frustration at their own failings and short comings. They wept because they were incapable of keeping the most important things first in their lives.

Sound familiar? It's just so hard to keep first things first, even for us who gather here Sunday after Sunday and who treasure Advent and Christmas because these seasons celebrate our Savior's coming. We may have shed a few tears of guilt and frustration ourselves. But notice that Nehemiah and Ezra said, **"This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep."** There are times when tears are totally appropriate for us sinful human beings. On Judgment Day all people on earth will mourn. Tears will be a big part of that day. Even for us Christians, funerals cause tears. Hurt and sorrow cause tears. And the messes we make of our lives through our own selfishness and thoughtlessness and temper can cause tears to flow even though it angers us that we can't control them.

But God still loves us and forgives us. He comes to us with the message of Christ and comforts us. God dries our tears. That was the whole point of this exercise. Ezra and Nehemiah had not gathered the people to rail on them. They had gathered them to teach them, to encourage them to walk in the direction God wanted them to go. That instruction was all based on one simple premise: God in his love had delivered his people from exile and he would deliver them from their sin. God in love was going to send a Savior to take all their sins away. The Feast of Trumpets takes place ten days before the great penitential festival of the Jews: Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. That was a day of weeping and confession, but it was also a day of forgiveness, a day when God sent the sins of the people away, a day when the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place and pour out the blood of the sacrifice in the presence of God himself and then come out and announce that all the people's sins were forgiven.

Everything in that holiday symbolized Christ. Ezra and Nehemiah assembled the people on the Feast of Trumpets to point them to God's love and forgiveness. Did you notice what they then commanded them to do? Celebrate. They told them to go home and eat "choice food and sweet drinks" – prepare holiday meals! They told them to share those meals with those who had none – in other words, to give gifts. Does that sound at all like the things we're going to be doing in less than two weeks? Certainly, materialism and greed are sins. When we have hard feelings because other people got better gifts than we did, we sin. When we get so caught up in the constant stress and demands on our time that we forgot the joy of this season, we have failed to appreciate God's gifts. But special meals, special foods and drinks, giving gifts, these were all ways that the Jews celebrated God's love and forgiveness. Jesus came and he paid for all our sin even in the Christmas season. When our hearts are focused on him, we can use all those holiday activities to rejoice in our Lord.

The key is that joy that comes from God's love. When we focus on that joy, when we focus on what God has done for us and given to us, when we see his Son and use all these wonderful holiday celebrations to remind ourselves of what it all means, the joy is our strength. Our strength, certainly, to get through all that we need to get done to celebrate this holiday season. But also our strength to face the difficulties of life. The strength to trust in Jesus when we can't forget our own sin and unfaithfulness. The strength to live for him in a world that just doesn't care what our Lord says about money or marriage or what is right and wrong. The Christian life isn't about beating ourselves up. It isn't about forcing ourselves to do what we have to do. It's about joy in the Lord. That joy gives us the strength to live for God. That joy itself comes from God.

II.

So whether we're singing and shouting for joy in the midst of happy, upbeat festivals or quietly being glad that God has blessed us in the shadow of illness or loss, true joy in Christ is a gift of God. But he uses things like holidays to help us to see it. The day after the great assembly in our text, the political and spiritual leaders of the people gathered again to study God's word. What a wonderful way to celebrate a holiday! They

rediscovered one of the most important Old Testament festivals. Through that festival God again taught them about the importance of joy in their faith. That's a lesson we can never learn too carefully. **The joy of the Lord is your strength. It expresses God's love for us.**

The holiday they rediscovered is traditionally called the Feast of Tabernacles. What's a tabernacle? It's a tent or a hut someone builds for shelter. God commanded his people to build these shelters and live in them for a week to celebrate this holiday. The Jewish people call it *Sukkot* which is the Hebrew word for the huts or shelters. If you look at all the festivals God commanded in the Old Testament, this one might be mentioned the most. King Solomon dedicated his temple during the Feast of Tabernacles. It was one of the three pilgrim feasts, one of the three times a year that all the people were supposed to come to Jerusalem. It had two important elements. First it was a harvest festival. In fact, sometimes the Old Testament calls it the Feast of Ingathering, so it has some elements of our Thanksgiving built into it. But it also commemorated the fact that God's people lived in whatever shelters they could build between Egypt and the Promised Land. If you remember that that time stretched out into forty years because the people disobeyed God and refused to enter the Promised Land, that might seem like another penitential emphasis. But God commanded this holiday before that sin. It is a joyful holiday, celebrating God's love and care for his people on their way home.

The Prophet Zechariah, who was probably just ending his ministry when the people rediscovered this festival, pictured the new heavens and the new earth by telling the people that all nations would come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. It reminded them of all God's promises. In fact, over the years, the Jewish people developed the tradition of marching around the temple on the days of this festival and shouting, "Hosanna!" "Save!" the welcome cry for the Savior.

This joyous festival comes less than a week after the Day of Atonement. So the seventh month started with New Year's. Ten days later they repented before God with their version of Good Friday. And less than a week later, they rejoiced in all that he had given them, most especially in his love and forgiveness. That's what God's people needed. They were struck by their own failure to do all that God commands and they celebrated his love and forgiveness. They celebrated the promise of a Savior who would make all people his people. God gave them a holiday with unique traditions and then God led them back to his word so that they could rediscover that joy and express it in their lives.

That really is function of all our religious holidays. We don't get any special points with God for following the church year. For the Jews, God commanded the calendar. But we have no commands in the Bible to celebrate Christmas or Easter, let alone Advent and Lent and Epiphany. In fact, St. Paul says that there's no sin in not following a religious calendar. So why do we do it? To focus our hearts and our minds on Christ. The more we know Christ, the more rejoice in God's love.

My friends, God wants us to have joy in our hearts. He is our Father in our heaven. Over the next couple of weeks, we parents are going to spend a lot of time and money buying gifts and planning meals and following family traditions. If doing all that stuff only adds stress and takes away from our joy, then maybe we should simplify our celebration. Or at least refocus it. Why do we do all that stuff? Just so we can see the joy our children have in those things. We spend all that time and money and effort because we love them. Their joy is our reward. God loves us more than any parent ever loved his or her children. While it is true that God does at times send pain and sorrow into our lives, God also fills our lives with opportunities to rejoice. Every time we do, we express the love that he has showered on us.

The greatest gift of God's love is his Son. Over the next two weeks we're going to have our last midweek Advent service, we're going to have our children's Christmas service, we're going to gather for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. On every one of those days, we're going to see God the Father working to send his Son to us. We're going to see Jesus taking on human flesh to live and die and rise again for us. We're going to see the Holy Spirit announcing all that in advance and he is going to work in our hearts again. All the joy this season gives us is really God's gift to us. My friends, celebrate God's love this Christmas. Amen.