

¹ *all the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.*

² *So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.*

⁵ *Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.*

⁹ *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." (Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5, 6, 8-10)*

The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength

Where do you find strength? When you have a tough day at work or you didn't sleep well the night before where do you find the strength to go in and do your job? When someone you love is sick, when someone has died, when you personally get bad news from the doctor, where do you find the strength to face the next day? Arnold Schwarzenegger, who most of us probably know as an actor and as the former governor of California, started his career as a champion body builder. He once said, "Strength does not come from winning. Your struggles develop your strengths. When you go through hardship and you decide not to surrender, that is strength." Someone else once said that fear is the source of strength. It can be a positive thing in the end – if you choose to work through that fear and conquer it. Gandhi once said, "Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will." What do all those things have in common? You find strength in yourself. You decide not to surrender. You work through your fears. You have an indomitable will. I suppose there is some truth to those statements. But God never tells us to look within ourselves for strength. He always tells us to look to him. He does that this morning in our Old Testament lesson. God tells us: **the joy of the Lord is your strength.**

I.

Today's lesson is about Ezra and Nehemiah. Most of us probably know their names from having memorized the books of the Bible. They both have a book named after them. The two books together tell a story that most of us don't know very well. Almost 150 years before the events in our lesson, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and the people were dragged off into exile in Babylon. But God had promised that after 70 years, he would bring his people home. God did that. But that doesn't mean life was easy back in Jerusalem. As the people filtered back over decades, even seventy or eighty years later, they were still dealing with difficulties: Jerusalem's wall had been torn down, so there was no security in the city. There were other peoples living around them who threatened them. The temple, the center of Jewish spiritual life, had been destroyed. Our lesson comes pretty late in the story. Ezra was a priest who took the lead in spiritual renewal and rebuilding the temple. Nehemiah was the governor. He led the people in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. The residents themselves rebuilt it, and they worked with swords strapped on, in case their enemies attacked. The wall was completed in record time.

Then comes our text. These events occurred at the beginning of the seventh month, which was actually the Jewish New Year and the Feast of Trumpets. After all that had happened in the year that was ending, they had mass assembly for the holiday in the plaza that stood in front of one of the newly completed gates. They built a platform there for Ezra and he spent the morning reading the Bible to them. Why did he do that? To

remind them who they were: the chosen people of God. To remind them of God's grace in bringing them home again, even though they still faced enormous challenges. To remind them of all the promises God had made to them, especially the promise of a Savior. Did you catch how the people reacted? They wept as they heard the word of God. Why? Because they understood just how unfaithful their fathers had been and just how much they had lost when they were conquered and exiled. It was a moment of spiritual clarity for the people of God.

But Ezra did not spend the morning reading the Bible to them to crush them. He read it to reintroduce them to the God who loved them. Then Nehemiah told them, **“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.”** He told them to celebrate that holiday. What do we do to celebrate the holidays? We eat and drink and give gifts. Many of us have special meals or deserts that we serve on Christmas or Easter. We get together and rejoice over God's love for us.

That was the message of this gathering. What was going to lift up their hearts as they contemplated how sinful they had been? What was going to give them the strength to face the very real problems that still remained? The joy of the LORD is your strength. What is the joy of the LORD? It's the joy that comes from knowing the God who loves us. It's the change that takes place in our hearts when God reviews for us again how he saved us from sin and death and promised us life with him forever. It's the comfort that comes from all the other promises that go with that greatest promise: God hears our prayers. God does all things for good. God walks with us all the way to heaven and he will never leave us or forsake us.

All that begins with Jesus. This Old Testament story is really about Jesus. It's a crucial link in God's plan to bring Jesus into the world. God had promised that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. That couldn't happen if Israel was still in exile. That couldn't happen if unbelief completely took over their country so that there were no believing parents left to teach Joseph and Mary and Zechariah and Elisabeth to know their Savior. So God sent the Babylonians to destroy the city and to purge the idolatry out of his people. Then he brought them home and sent Ezra and Nehemiah to lead a spiritual renewal among his people. God did all that so that when the fullness of time had come, Jesus was born in Bethlehem and died outside Jerusalem.

Jesus is also the heart of this story because he is the comfort of sinners. Ezra read the law to his people and it broke their hearts. That's what the law does. But God never wants to leave us brokenhearted and weeping. God forgives us. God restores us and heals us and lifts up our hearts through Jesus. Even though these people lived more than four hundred years before Jesus was born, he was their Savior. And he is ours. He lived and he died to make us holy in God's sight. He was the perfect disciple neither the Jews nor we gentiles could ever be. Because he was, God calls us holy and perfect. Jesus died and paid for all the sins of all people who will ever live. Jesus died and paid for us. Whatever sins trouble you today, whatever weakness and failure brings tears to your eyes when you think about what you've done or said in the course of your life, God wants you to rejoice today because Jesus paid for that sin. He rose to make sure you know that's true. He rose to tell us that we will live with him forever.

The joy of knowing that is our strength. When life hurts, the resurrection of Jesus promises us that a day is coming when we will never hurt again. It promises us that the Father who sacrificed his only Son to save us, will turn even tears and sorrow to our good here and then he will bring us home. When we feel lost and alone, when the troubles of this life overwhelm us, we still have the joy of the Lord. It's more than just being happy and we feel it even when we're sad. The joy of the Lord gives us strength because we know that the love that drove Christ to lay down his life will never abandon us here. It gives us strength because we know that Jesus conquered death and he will use that same power to conquer all that we face in life. **The joy of the Lord is our strength. You find that joy in Christ.**

II.

How do we get that strength? That's what this reading teaches us. Sometimes, we forget how God pumps strength into our hearts and our lives. We focus on things like prayer or being positive or not giving up. Prayer, certainly is gift of God. He hears and answer those prayers. But we Lutherans say, “Prayer is not a means of grace.” What we mean by that is that prayer is how we reach out to God. It's not how God reaches into our hearts and renews our faith. If that's true about prayer, it's even more true about being positive or not giving up. Those things don't give us strength. They are examples of the attitude we have when we have strength.

So what does give us strength? The joy of the Lord. Not manipulating our feelings or painting smiles on our faces when we can only cry. Not choosing to be positive and to see the glass as half full instead of half empty. The joy of the Lord is the joy that comes from the Lord. Hearing that God loves us. Reading that message in his word. Remembering how he showed that love in our baptism and receiving that love in communion, that's how God strengthens us. He points to Jesus and all he did for us. That renews our faith and gets us through one more day of pain and sorrow.

Did you see how God underlined that reality for us this morning? When the people gathered at the Water Gate in Jerusalem, Ezra read the Bible to the people from dawn until noon. How long was that, six hours? Would you be willing to have a church service that went that long? I worry if a communion service goes longer than an hour and fifteen minutes. Six hours? Could you do that? Would you do that?

It was even worse than that. Our reading says, **“They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.”** What does that mean? Certainly, it means that they stopped and offered explanations while they were reading. But if you opened your Bibles to this verse, you would see there's footnote there that says, “Or translating it.” That's probably the point. You see, for two generations the people had lived in Babylon. What happens when people move to a different country? Their children and grandchildren grow up speaking the language of that country. The Jews were forgetting Hebrew. They learned Aramaic in Babylon, which became the language of the Jewish people from this time until 1946 when the state of Israel was founded. But their Bible was written in Hebrew. So Ezra and the Levites probably read a section in Hebrew and then translated and explained it to them into Aramaic.

So would you stand for that? Six hours of me reading a couple of verses to you in Greek or Hebrew and then giving you a running translation and explanation of what the Bible was saying? You know what? I'm not going to try it. I like my job too much. But notice how this account begins: the people assembled and they told Ezra to bring out the book of the law. They wanted him to do this. Why? Because God speaks to us in his word. That's how he gives us the joy that is our strength.

My friends, you and I have the blessing that these people wanted: we get to hear the word of God every Sunday in words we can understand. God calls us to come and hear his word, to come and take his body and blood, to come and be forgiven for all our sins. God doesn't do that to make us jump through hoops. He brings us here because he knows how hard our lives are. He wants us to hear his promises so that we can trust in him and have joy. And **the joy of the Lord is your strength. You find that joy in his word.**

When I was a missionary in Colombia, our synod was working with a church in Cuba. Now, the Cuban government was never going to let us put resident missionaries in Cuba. But they did let us fly in for a couple of weeks at a time and serve the people there. When I went, we visited a little town called Malena del Sur. A man there had built a chapel onto the side of his house. It was cinder block with a tin roof. Cuba is hot. Well, it was much hotter inside that chapel. We got there in the morning, planning to teach for three or four hours. But the people there asked us to keep going. Every time I tried to finish, they asked me for more. They didn't know when a pastor would be coming again, and they were desperate to hear the word of God. This went on for six or more hours in that hot, little chapel. You and I don't need to do that. By the grace of God, we can come here day after day and we hear the message of his love. Jesus has taken all your sin away. Jesus will never leave you or forsake you. Jesus will work all things in your life to keep you in the faith and bring you home. That is the joy of the Lord. And it is the source of all strength today and every day. Amen.