

Rev. Dan Welch Epiphany 3 1-27-19 Text- Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10

In our Old Testament reading the people of Judah definitely have an interesting reaction to hearing God's Word! As Ezra the scribe and priest stands high above on a platform so all could hear, he reads from the Torah, the Law of God. As he does so, the people begin to **weep**. They shed tears because for so long they had been deprived of the Word of the Lord. After returning to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon they had gone years without hearing God's Word. They likely thought God had abandoned them. So, now they weep passionately for what they are receiving.

Ezra tells them **not** to weep, but instead to '**rejoice!**' 'Be joyful', he says, 'because this very Word you are now hearing is **intended** to bring you joy.' And as Ezra so memorably puts it, "The joy of the Lord is your strength!"

And the people of Judah, hearing God's Word read to them that day, truly **could** be joyful because they learned again that God had **not** abandoned them, His chosen people. Indeed, as Ezra's people listened and worshiped, they were surrounded by gracious signs of God's abiding presence with them: The second temple had been built. The city of Jerusalem **and** its walls were now rebuilt. These were proofs of God's protection and care for them. Even though they had gone for so long without hearing His Word, God had definitely **not** abandoned them. He had faithfully brought His children home after decades of exile, just as He promised! What a story! What a message!

And the great thing for you and for me is that we, too, are a part of this true and wonderful story! Yes, the people of Judah learned that no matter what their sins and mistakes were, God loved and cared for them and offered them free forgiveness. That was their reason to be joyful. That's what could give them real strength.

So too with us: Week after week as we live our lives with all of its ups and downs, our moments of hope and moments of discouragement. (Maybe at times we're tempted to think God has abandoned **us**.) We have those moments when the terrible reality of our sins and mistakes terrify us, God comes to us. Through His Word our Lord assures us of just how much He loves and cares for us. And just when we think we have out-sinned God's forgiveness, He points us to Christ and lovingly delivers His forgiveness to us. This creates true joy in our hearts. This joy is our strength. Christ at the center of our lives!

Read through the Bible and you will see that there are so many places that tell us to rejoice when we hear God's Word. And **why** exactly do we rejoice when we hear His Word? Not just because here in the Bible we learn what we are to do and not to do, which is partly what God's Word is for; there are

instructions in the Bible for us to follow, that's for sure. God's Word **is** a lamp for our feet and a light for our path (Ps. 119: 105), but the main and real reason we are to rejoice when we hear God's Word is because it fundamentally is **not** a rule book! Quite the contrary, it teaches us that **Christ** has kept the rules, the whole Law of God, for us and on our behalf.

We rejoice when we hear God's Word because it points us to Christ who saved us, who was born for us so that we would be kept from the burden of having to keep the whole law perfectly.

We rejoice when we hear God's Word because of the freedom that it teaches us, that in Christ God is at peace with us and we are at peace with God. We are free in Christ because of the salvation that He has accomplished for us through His death and resurrection.

We rejoice because God's Word, and the Good News of what He has done for us, as recorded in that Word, serves as the center and core for our lives! Having that center and core is something so very essential, so crucial for our lives.

Without a center and a core, life is literally crazy! It's chaotic and without any overall meaning. Consider what would happen to our solar system without the sun providing the **core** around which all planets, including our earth, are kept in place. Without the sun and its gravity, the solar system would break apart.

Consider what would happen to our earth and its people without gravity providing the core energy by which we stay firmly planted, by which the sea remains in place, by which even the air continues to surround the earth. Everything on the earth would simply drift away.

Now, consider what happens to a group of people or a family that has no center core truths and values around which their lives and their relationships together are organized. It is likely that relationships disintegrate and each individually attends to his own needs and directions.

And consider what happens to an individual who lives without regard to central core truths and meaning. Life without a strong core at the center is lived sporadically, with no meaningful purpose. Life is chaotic. Sure, some people try to fill that void with things like money, the pursuit of power or the pursuit of pleasure, but in the end, without Christ all those pursuits are destined to end in vain. (After all, he who dies with the most toys still dies!) Only in Christ is there any hope for life beyond this world. Only in Christ is true and lasting joy to be found. (pause)

When the people of Judah first returned from the Babylonian exile, many were living in Jerusalem, and they had even rebuilt the walls of the city. But they still had no organizing principles, no central core truths, around which to pattern and organize their living. They were all just living life aimlessly, going from one day to the next without any real purpose.

Enter onto that scene Ezra who “read plainly from the book of the law of God, interpreting it so that all could understand what was read” as verse eight of our text explains. The people were weeping when they heard “the words of the law.” But Ezra said to the people, “Do not be saddened this day for rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength” (8:10b). In other words, the core that organizes living and gives life purpose and meaning is **God’s Word** which always points us to Christ. **That’s** what gives us true joy and it’s that joy that gives us strength!

That was true for the people in Ezra’s day and it’s just as true for you and me in our day. Reading and studying God’s Word individually and together, praying together, and receiving Christ’s Body and Blood in the Lord’s Supper together are all clear, wonderful examples of keeping God’s Word at the center point of our lives.

In addition to having our church family here, what a blessing it is to have as an extension of our ministry, our own Christian day school. As we begin National Lutheran Schools Week, we rejoice along with over 2000 other congregations with Lutheran pre-schools, elementary schools, and high schools to have Christ at the center of not only our religious curriculum but at the center of all of the school subjects.

Here at First Lutheran School, we are truly blessed with faithful and caring teachers, dedicated parents and families who make the sacrifices necessary to have this education provided for the children of our church and community. And we are blessed with **amazing, awesome** students all the way from three years old to eighth grade who are here to grow in God’s Word and God’s grace.

At First Lutheran Church and First Lutheran School, we are truly blessed by God to be centered in Christ and centered in joy. We rejoice in the Good News despite our daily sins, our daily mistakes, in Christ we stand forgiven! Yes, through Jesus Christ His Son, God forgives us, embraces us, and loves us with an everlasting love. He is at the center of our church. He is at the center of our school. He is at the center of our lives. In all these places He brings us joy, and.... ‘the joy of the Lord truly is our strength!’ Amen