

## **“Returning to God’s Word” based on Ezra-Nehemiah and Luke 4:14-30**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on January 26, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

It is often said that you can never go home again. Things change. Time marches on. Often, we’re drawn to nostalgia, which literally means the pain of returning, going home. The Greek word *nostos* means to return, and *algos*, which means pain. This is where we get the word analgesic for pain relievers like aspirin, means “without pain.”

In this mindset, we look to yesteryear, and we imagine a past that was somehow better. We have fond memories, and we cherish a time that was simpler. In our age of rapid progress, it is very comforting to do this. We want to do all we can to restore the way things were and yet, it never seems we can go back.

Last year, I came across an analogy, but unfortunately, I cannot recall the book I read it in. The author stated that nostalgia is like going into a music shop in your brain. When we encounter the latest music by turning on the radio now, it’s awful. So much is terrible. I think, “Why can’t we go back to when music was so much better?” In our minds, we go through and think of all the classics and the songs that were special, sure some of the artists had duds, but the rest was amazing. We conclude that music was so much better when we were growing up.

But the reality is that in the music we encounter today, we are hearing everything – all of it. The good, the bad, and the downright ugly are all thrown on our mental store shelves. Our classics section, on the contrary, is curated and only the best remains there. So when we look at old music in our minds, we only remember the best.

We might remember the kitschy things that we know were awful, but it was special to us because it was funny or something else, but our condensed selection makes us look at the flood of things coming out now and think most of it is terrible. It has not been curated yet in our minds, and the truth is that when we were young, most of it was terrible then too.

I’ve had the same experience recently with a retro game console we bought for our kids. In my mind, there were so many great games on Atari, Nintendo, Sega, and PlayStation. There was rarely a bad one. But as I scroll through the thousands of old games, I can’t find my favorites. I’m forgetting the ones I loved as I see the names of these terrible games. All I can think is, “Who bought these?” And the weird thing is I probably bought them or rented them. There are so many games I had selectively forgotten. Terrible games and it’s hard to find the good ones.

What on earth does that have to do with our readings today?

Well, our scripture today is taken from the Book of Nehemiah, chapter 8, verses 1 to 13, which with the book of Ezra, tells the story of Israel’s nostalgia. They were a people returning from exile to their homeland. In this strange pair of books, which long ago had been considered one text, we have four movements describing the people’s efforts to rebuild. Each movement though, begins with a decree from Persia’s king and the first three support the vision of three particular Jewish leaders sent back with the king’s support to carry out what they want to do in rebuilding. Each leader faces opposition and takes decisive action. Then it falls flat.

The first movement describes the initial return to Judah to rebuild the temple. The Persian King Cyrus says he is answering to the LORD, whom he calls God of heaven, and he tells the people to build a house for their God in Jerusalem. He wants them out of Babylon and to send this god back to Jerusalem. He says that the people living in Judah should help rebuild. He wants the locals to

help the exiles. Once there, some of the leading families made generous gifts, to fund the construction and clothe the priests there so sacrifices can begin.

The people settle and make sacrifices, but they do not begin rebuilding the temple right away. The prophet Haggai has to call them out and God calls on a man named Zerubbabel to get it built. Once the foundation is set, the people celebrate the beginning of the construction. "It's here! We're coming back!" Yet some who are old enough to remember the original temple mourn, indicating that something about the new temple just isn't right.

At this time, some of the people who were living in Judah, having been resettled there, say, "Hey can we help? Zerubbabel won't let them, saying, "You have no part in this!" as if it was their fault for being left behind. It's strange because it violates the original decree from Cyrus, and it opposes the vision of Zechariah, a prophet mentioned as being there.

In the book of Zechariah, the prophet says that the new temple will be a place where people from every nation gather to worship the one true God of Israel. The people who were rejected didn't like it and they overreact. They reach out to Cyrus's successor and get him to stop construction. Haggai the prophet says God calls on Zerubbabel to begin again and eventually a new king allows it.

The temple is built, and the leaders call for a celebration and the people rejoice again, but there's no indication that God has returned to the temple. A fiery cloud descended when the tabernacle was built in Leviticus. A fiery cloud descended when the first temple was built in the book of 1 Kings. But the Jewish writers of that day said the "shekina" or presence of God never returned to that building. It's why Daniel's prophecy said the exile would not be over, even after the people returned.

Later, we meet Ezra who was sent by Persia's king to teach the Torah. He was not part of the first wave of people to return. Ezra was a Levite who could trace his ancestry through Aaron's grandson Phinehas. Now, Phinehas was filled with zeal who was so mad that Israelites were mixing with the tribes around them that he was credited as righteous when he killed a fellow Israelite and his Midianite bride. This is early on, when the Israelites moved into the promised land, so there was a reason that this caused great risk to them.

This is the lineage of Ezra who becomes obsessed with the fact that the Jews who returned from exile and have since married women who had not been of Israelite heritage. Times are different now, but Ezra begins a campaign to have them all get divorced, and he says the women and children of these marriages should be sent away – left to fend for themselves or starve and die.

Now who am I to say times have changed? Maybe Ezra is right? Ezra claims to be following the law and believes that he is doing God's will, but there is no command from God dictating that these marriages be ended. The contemporary prophet Malachi is who indicates time has changed because God says, "I hate divorce," and that the divorce being called for causes violence against these women and children. Malachi opposes Ezra and so, once again the attempt to restore the past falls flat. Few follow Ezra's command to divorce their wives and the nation still languishes under Persian rule, far from its previous glory.

Here is where Nehemiah enters the story, when he hears Jerusalem's walls are in disrepair. He's in the court of the Persian King and asks to be sent back to rebuild those walls. There is no command from God to do so. The command comes from the king of Persia. Like with Zerubbabel, the people living there offer to help the project, and like Zerubbabel, Nehemiah refused the help. The people who were rejected oppose his efforts and are even attacking the builders who are building while holding swords at the same time.

Once again, this goes against the prophets. Now, prophets speak words directly a word heard from God. I am not a prophet. I interpret scripture. Prophets are a rare breed and live hard lives. So, it is the prophet Zechariah who specifically says that God's vision is for Jerusalem to be an unwalled city. He says that many nations would join themselves to the Lord, coming to that city The Lord promises to be the wall of fire around the city, and the glory within (Zechariah 2). Instead, Nehemiah decides he wants to build a physical wall with his own hands to keep nations out, so they don't pollute the Israelites within. The wall and the confidence in the nation's glory, undermine what God is actually asking for. And once again, things fall flat.

This brings us to our reading today. In it, the people want to engage with God directly They've gone through Ezra long enough and they want the Torah read to them. Notice I keep saying Torah and not "Law." Your translation probably says "Law." I've left it as Torah because in English the word law leads us to misunderstand this. The Torah is not a list of commands. It is the story of God. It is God's direction, in directing the course of history and how God is directing individual lives to be transformed. It contains commands, but it's about God's action in the world.

When we think too much about "law" as a list of laws kept at the courthouse, we shift God from heavenly father to taskmaster. Think about your own fathers and mothers. They engaged with you and may have had a list of dos and don'ts, but if you're like me, what you remember are the stories. I remember how my father loved me and engaged me in this world, teaching me things not with a list of things to memorize, but by being a part of my life.

The story of God's love for the world is focused through Abraham, the people of Israel and Judah, and ultimately Jesus. Now we get to be a part of that story. It's God's story, but we get to be a part of it. The Torah and Good News are ways of describing God's story with humanity. It is important to remember this when reading the Ezra-Nehemiah texts.

You see, Ezra does not decide to read the scriptures to the people on his own. No, the people ask this of Ezra. He's fine giving them his interpretation. They ask to hear it. On doing so, they weep. This was their story. From creation to entering the promised land, they heard of God's action in the world, and how they were a special part of it.

Ezra read the text, and many helped the people understand the text, including Zechariah who is listed among the names. The primary reason for this, I believe, is that the law was written in Hebrew. The people are not speaking biblical Hebrew at this time, but Aramaic. To give you an analogy, imagine yourself reading Old English like Shakespeare or even earlier. Sure it sounds familiar and you pick up on a lot of it. But there are things that just make no sense because that's not how our language is anymore.

It's doubtful that Ezra had a translation back then of the Torah in Aramaic. He is reading it in Hebrew. So, the people need someone to tell them what it means. It's kind of like how the King James is hard for a lot of people to read with all its old words. You can figure it out, but some words have completely changed in meaning.

So in helping the people understand the language in which the scripture is being read to them, the people standing with Ezra and the teachers wandering through the crowds offered a level of interpretation aimed at walking them through the text as I'm trying to do today. It wasn't choosing a doctrine and proof texting it. It was about walking through the text and giving a general sense or insight.

After all the attempts by Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah to make God's word singular in focus on their key issues, the people got to hear the whole thing, and they mourned for what they missed.

Ezra, Nehemiah and the Levites say not to mourn but celebrate! Maybe they needed to mourn a little bit more.

In response, Ezra and Nehemiah lead the people to make a beautiful declaration of God's action in the world. It is about God's action in and through their people all the way back to Abraham. It's about the connections between people throughout time to God, but they excluded anyone else from being a part of this message.

And what's more, the covenant was not made with God, but with the seal of their leaders, the Levites, and the priests. They confess wrongdoing in the past, but they don't commit to transformation. They don't commit to anything. They admit their sin, but that's it. They simply lament their continued exile.

Many who stood with Ezra reading Torah, signed this new covenant. But you know who didn't sign it? Zechariah. You know who else didn't sign it? Haggai or Malachi. The prophets who are also in our bible didn't want any part of this.

Beloved, the stories of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah are descriptions of what happened. They are not prescriptions for how we are supposed to live. A lot of things can sound biblical, but anything that is taken and elevated to be the highest doctrine, usually becomes an evil in and of itself. This is where we have to test all teachings, especially those people say are drawn from the bible, against the teachings of Jesus, who is the Word of God, who bore our flesh, lived in our limits, died on the cross for us and rose again for us. This is the ultimate action of God in our world.

In Jesus, God was humble enough to dwell as one of us, to teach us, and guide us, and show us what the true Kingdom of God is supposed to look like. Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah are flawed characters, trying to do their best, but each needs correction from God done through the prophets. In the end, they fail to fulfill God's covenant with Abraham, which was to be a blessing to all the nations. They choose to write their own about how they are victims and how the nations keep them down, when God's promise to Abraham was for them to be the blessing. Jesus had to be the blessing instead, doing what God's people could not.

Beloved, true revival and transformation always comes from an encounter with God's word. When we hear what scripture says, it should always make us feel uncomfortable. We should wrestle with scripture and should never look at the bible and think it says, "I'm perfect." That's not what it's there for. The bible is meant to say we need the God who acts in and through what is written in the book. We need to be concerned about whether we are living our faith right and we need to let scripture challenge how we see the world – especially our most deep seeded ideologies. Many try to make scripture fit their own view of the world, but we need to let scripture shape our view of the world by seeing how God acts in and for the world.

In our first reading, Jesus goes to his hometown synagogue, and he reads from scripture. These are the words of a prophet, from what we now call the 61st chapter of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom to captives, recovery of sight to those who are blind, and set free those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor!"

At first, the people are intrigued. He says this has been fulfilled in their hearing it. They are probably thinking, "Awesome! This hometown kid, the son of Joseph, could he really be the Messiah? This is great!" They spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words from his mouth. They want to hear more from him and then he calls them out. He calls them out for wanting this text to only be about them and their poverty, their broken hearts, their captivity to Rome, their

blindness, and their own oppression. They want in their hearts for him to heal them and them alone. But again, Jesus is the Word of God in our human flesh.

So Jesus tells them all about God's actions to the Gentiles, to the people of the nations. This enrages the people, and they want to throw him off the cliffs around the town. These are his own childhood friends. "The Chosen" series streaming online does a wonderful job of portraying this. They show the people who loved Jesus and whom Jesus had done things for choose to lead the group to throw him off a cliff because he said that his mission is to reach people outside of Israel. They turn on him because he saw poverty, broken hearts, captivity, blindness, and oppression, in the people outside of his own community, his own people, his own faith, and his own nation.

His friends tried to murder him, but he just walked away in their midst. How sad would that be if the God who is in our midst walked away from us?

Beloved, Jesus is our primary interpreter of scripture. When in doubt turn to him. You may hear something that sounds biblical but ask yourself if you could hear Jesus saying those words. Someone may be defending our faith, our way of life, our culture, but would they throw Jesus off the cliff for saying what he said about God's mission being to all people?

Likewise, beware of those who think Jesus just confirms all of their thoughts, and that Jesus is their buddy who they have in their pocket to throw out at any time. Jesus says a lot of challenging things too. There's no one who should read Jesus's words and think, "That's all easy." It's a challenge to read the gospels. Jesus is neither permissive of all things, nor does he condemn. Jesus pushes us to be transformed into his image. This is a challenge because we live in a world that tells us we need to be a hero in our own story, or that we need to find our true selves to live out our story.

The truth of the gospel is that we are not the star of our own story. God is the star of our stories. We don't make this world perfect by our own effective innovation of heroism or self-discovery. Our calling is to respond to God action revealed in God's love, and God's word.

We are called to be transformed by the Holy Spirit to look more like Jesus, who reveals the Father. Faith means trusting God Jesus embodies the love of the Triune God. He embodies mercy. He embodies gentleness, patience, and kindness. All of these things may seem simple and naïve in our world today, but as Psalm 19 tells us, God's Torah makes the simple wise. Amen.

*For a great recap of Ezra-Nehemiah check out the Bible Project commentary and video which can be found online at <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-ezra-nehemiah/>*