# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“The Joy of the Lord is Your Strength”**

**Nehemiah 8:7-10**

 **August 20, 2023**

This morning we turn to the Old Testament book of Nehemiah where we find the well-loved biblical phrase, “The joy of the Lord is your strength.” First, though, some background. The Jews have returned to Jerusalem after 70 years of captivity in Babylon. They have rebuilt the Temple and repaired the walls around Jerusalem which were destroyed during their war with Babylon. For most of these captives, whatever they knew of their faith came from memory or the memories of others. It is now time for the people to hear the Holy Scriptures and be taught their meaning, and they ask Ezra the scribe to read the Word of God to them. We are told that all the people listened closely to God’s Word, and they praised God for his Word. I invite you to turn with me to Nehemiah 8:7-10 as we pick up the story

The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah—then instructed the people in the Law while everyone remained in their places. They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage. Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were interpreting for the people said to them, “Don’t mourn or weep on such a day as this! For today is a sacred day before the Lord your God.” For the people had all been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. And Nehemiah continued, “Go and celebrate with a feast of rich foods and sweet drinks, and share gifts of food with people who have nothing prepared. This is a sacred day before our Lord. Don’t be dejected and sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength!”

The Word of God, read and explained to the people that day, told them who he was, and who they were, and what it meant to be created by God. It explained to them about their history, and showed how God’s laws for them were meant to inform them what they were created for: to love the Lord their God, and to love one another. It showed them where they had failed, and it gave them hope for how God can take failure and bring good from it.

The Word of God does the same for us today. When the Bible is read aloud and explained, people begin to understand God and people begin to understand themselves and the world in which they live. This is why the Scriptures need to be central in our lives and in our church. This is why in my years of ministry with this congregation I have focused on the reading and explaining of God’s Word, so that you and I may be “prepared and equipped for every good work” as the Apostle Paul puts it in his letter to Timothy.

Why, then, were they weeping? They were weeping because one of the effects of the Word of God is to show us what is wrong with our lives, both because of what we have done and because of what others have done. The evil in our hearts and actions, and the evil in society, come from the pride and arrogance of our lives. But while mourning our sin and weeping over its consequences is necessary and important, it is not the final word God has for us in his Word. The final word is joy.

I’m sure you remember Jesus’ story of the prodigal son who ruined his life. But ruin was not the end of the story. He went back to offer himself to his father as a slave, but his father rejected his offer. Instead, he prepared for him a feast. The tragedy didn’t win; joy won. The witness of the Bible is that we’re guilty, but we’re not doomed, because Jesus has paid the price for our sin on the cross, and we are brought into joy.

It is this joy, the joy of being forgiven, which is your strength. What a great word for grieving people who see the evil in their lives and in the lives of those around them, and mourn over what it has produced. God forgives and God restores. That is what Jesus meant what he said, “Blessed are those who mourn.” When we studied these words from the Sermon on the Mount earlier this year, we said that Jesus was speaking of mourning for sin. We can’t be blessed until we mourn sin; we can’t be comforted until we have learned to grieve. When you see the hurt, pain, and despair which sin can produce and you grieve over it, then you are ready for the comfort of forgiveness. Then you are ready for the joy of the Lord to give you strength.

While tears and sorrow are appropriate responses to sinfulness, God calls us away from mourning and toward blessing, away from sadness and toward joy. That day Nehemiah instructed the people to allow the reading and instruction of God’s Word to move them to celebrate with great joy the reality that they had been forgiven. Only in forgiveness can we find strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow. Only in the reading and understanding of God’s Word will we come to know and live the truth that the joy of the Lord is your strength.