

Sermon Notes for 1/24/16 (Epiphany 3)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Nehemiah 8:8-10

Theme: **THE JOY OF THE LORD IS YOUR STRENGTH!**

The Point: The joy of the Lord is the strength of His people – joy that springs from His salvation, joy anchored in His gracious will, joy fulfilled in His eternal plan.

Introduction: “The joy of the Lord is your strength.” That is the conclusion of the Old Testament reading from the book of Nehemiah, read just a few moments earlier. Nehemiah was not a prophet, but he served as governor of Israel by leave of Persian King Artaxerxes, whom he had served as cupbearer before revealing his desire to return to Jerusalem to assist in reconstruction efforts in his homeland. Ezra and Nehemiah lived in the middle of the 5th century before Christ.

Ezra served as a priest to the people of Israel. Nehemiah’s primary work (from a biblical standpoint) was the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, including many of its gates. The number of gates in Jerusalem has varied through the years, usually from 9 to 11. At Nehemiah’s time, it appears that there were ten gates. The Water Gate (not a hotel in Jerusalem) was on the eastern side of the city, more toward the south end of the city, between a couple of large towers.

Apparently the “square,” that is, the area adjacent to the Water Gate, accommodated large crowds – probably just inside the city wall. On the first day of the seventh month, an assembly of the people of Israel was called at this location. Ezra read for several hours from the “Book of the Law of Moses,” a large section of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), perhaps mainly Deuteronomy. The reading was accompanied by a time of instruction. Presumably the Hebrew text would not be totally intelligible to the people – and good preaching always helps people come to a deeper understanding of the Word of God in its written form.

As the people heard the words of the Law, they began to weep, recognizing that they had not been living according to the Word of the Lord. But Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites who were teaching the people insisted that this day was not to be a day of fasting and mourning, but rather a day of rejoicing. The conclusion is the word that we noted earlier: “Do not be grieved, for the **joy** of the Lord is your strength.”

When we come together and reflect on the Word of the Lord together, we also may become disheartened. We have not lived according to the call of that Word on our lives. In fact, this very day we have already joined together in admitting our sorrow and grief for our failure and our rebellion and our sin. C.S. Lewis helps us to make confession: “Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” No wonder we groan and cry!

But, by the mercy and grace of our heavenly Father, and for the sake of the innocent suffering and death of His beloved Son Jesus, we have been declared innocent, not guilty, forgiven for all that had separated us from Him. The joy of the Lord is **your** strength as you claim the power of that forgiveness through faith. In the parables that Jesus tells in Luke 15, He says “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (15:10) The joy of the Lord is multiplied when a sinner turns from sin and turns to Christ. So the angels have been dancing this morning over those repentant hearts who have heard once again the declaration of forgiveness over their miserable lives. Now those miserable souls have been touched with the joy of the Lord, and that makes all the difference in the world. As David puts it in Psalm 32, “Blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” Or in Psalm 51, “Restore to

me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.” Forgiveness brings deep, lasting joy!

A smile is contagious, isn't it? When my grandsons smile, I can't help but follow after them (unless it is one of Raymond's forced smiles, in which case I just groan). We have been seeing a good many pictures of Jesus these days where He is pictured as smiling. I think that has been a good balance, given all the serious and somber pictures of Him that we see – and of course, quite different from what we experience of Jesus during His passion and crucifixion. But I have a hard time picturing Jesus on Easter morning without a huge, beaming smile on His face. After all, He has at that time out-deviled the devil. As the psalmist puts it, “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” (Ps. 30:5)

And it is the JOY of the Lord that is our strength, not the commands or threats of our Lord. Our concentration is to be, not on some orders passed on from the heavenly throne, but on the gracious will of a loving Father. His highest desire is to know your love and your fellowship, whatever it takes, up to and including the death of His own Son, to accomplish that. He wants us to know His joy fully and completely. Jesus said this, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (Jn 10:10) In the upper room, He told the Twelve, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” (Jn 15:11)

That does not mean that our joy will ever have total fulfillment on this side of heaven. We still face the sorrow and distress that the world brings daily by virtue of its opposition to God and His ways. Jesus' words stayed with the disciples through His suffering and their own: “In the world you face persecution. But [He continued] take courage; I have conquered the world!” (Jn 16:33) In this world, we can take courage, we can remain filled with joy, all because of Jesus' victory. He is risen, He is victorious, and by that victory we are filled with joy, even through our own times of distress and trouble and grief.

James, the brother of our Lord, says it well (1:2-4), “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.” Consider your trials nothing but joy, since those trials are working perfection in your faith and life, a maturity and completeness that could not be achieved through reading a textbook or even a “mock drill” of difficulty. During my commuting time the past couple of weeks, I have been listening to a book on CD titled *The War*, an account of World War II from the perspective of a number of its veterans (including some from Luverne, MN). Many of them relate how different the real battlefield is from the training that they received – not that training is not good and helpful, but the only thing that really builds the character of the soldier is being in the trenches. If you can count trials “nothing but joy,” then joy must be closer to our will, our determination, our resolve than it is to our feelings and our emotions.

Joy is much different from happiness. Happiness has to do with the emotions, whereas joy reaches down past the emotions into the center of our will. Happiness is fleeting, based on pleasurable activities or the presence of friends who are like me or what I am having for dinner. Joy does not depend on the circumstances that I am dealing with, but it flows from my being, from my status as a redeemed child of a loving Father. Happiness comes and goes, unpredictably, like most of your emotions. Joy endures, even through the most challenging of experiences, through trials and persecution, even through death itself.

As a third-century man was anticipating death, he penned these last words to a friend: “It's a bad world, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people are the Christians--and I am one of them.” (*Today In The Word*, June, 1988) And that is really the key, isn't it? “I am one of them.” I have thrown my lot with Jesus, who gives joy in the

midst of defeat, despair and hopelessness.

Pediatrician David Cerqueira shared a story that I thought spoke to this matter of joy in all situations. He told about his wife preparing a Sunday School lesson on serving by being useful. A little girl protested, "But I don't know how to do many useful things." The teacher looked around and saw an empty flower vase on the windowsill, "Sarah," she said, "you could bring in a flower and put it in the vase. That would be a useful thing." Sarah said, "But that's not important." "It is if you are helping someone," was the wise teacher's reply. Sunday after Sunday, Sarah brought in a dandelion or some other bright yellow flower. One Sunday the pastor found out about Sarah's gifts, and he used her flower vase as a sermon illustration.

That same week, the doctor got a call from Sarah's mom. Sarah was lethargic and had no appetite. After a battery of tests, the doctor had to give her parents the news that she had an incurable disease. Sarah got weaker and weaker over time. One day the doctor examined her at home and told her parents that she would soon be leaving the world. They should spend as much time as possible with her. That was a Friday afternoon. The following Sunday, as the pastor concluded his sermon, he stared at the back of the church in amazement. There was Sarah. Her parents had brought her for one last visit. She was bundled in a blanket, a dandelion in one hand. She walked to the front of the church and put the flower in the vase and a piece of paper beside it. Four days later, Sarah died. At her funeral, the pastor told the doctor to read the message Sarah had left. He read, "Dear God, This vase has been the biggest honor of my life. Sarah" The doctor concluded his story, "I now realize in a new way that life is an opportunity to serve God by serving people. And, as Sarah put it, that is the biggest honor of all."

Joy is not found in piling up more things or designing our own self-centered experiences, but in serving others in Jesus' name. As the author of Hebrews exhorts us (12:1-2), "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God." His life was pointed totally at serving us and saving us.

Today's Epistle speaks to how our joy also governs our relationships within the Church. Listen to how one commentator reflects on Paul's powerful image of the Body of Christ: "How amazing is God's workshop of creating and maintaining our bodies and gifts! Heart rhythm and respirations to match energy output. Digestion transforming food to fuel every cell in the body. Brain sending messages to direct every body organ's function. All without our asking. Meanwhile, the Holy Spirit apportions gifts to each person and inspires their use. But all must work in concert--like a symphony--or there will be discord. What if instruments (like humans) had insecurities and jealousies, some refusing to play for fear of making mistakes? Drums just beating away without any notes. Bassoons sad for not sounding cheery like flutes. Trumpets miffed because they're never in the front row. Basses looking down on the insignificant piccolo. But what beautiful harmony when people (like instruments) play joyfully in tune and in unison--each applauding, appreciating, and enhancing the gifts of others." (*Sabbatheology*, 1/18/16)

Conclusion: We know Thomas Edison as a successful inventor and entrepreneur. Yet he faced multiple challenges and disasters. In December of 1914 (when Edison was 67 years of age), fire broke out in the film room of his facilities in West Orange, NJ. Damage exceeded \$2 million, though the supposedly fireproof buildings had been insured for only about a quarter million dollars. When Edison's son Charles found his father that night, Edison, watching the fire and entranced by the flames, said, "Son, find your mother. Bring her here. She will never see anything like this as long as she lives." And in the morning, among the ruins, he was heard to say, "There is great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew." Three weeks later, he delivered his first phonograph. Would to God that we would be able to have such a spirit amid the disasters that surround us in this world! But that is what joy brings, the joy based on our risen Lord's promises. When Jesus calls, "Finished!" over this world in

the fiery disaster that awaits, all our mistakes will be burned up. We will be able to start anew. And we will have an eternity of productive and joy-filled service that we can presently only imagine. Yes, indeed, the joy of the Lord **is** your **strength**, now and into all eternity. For Jesus' sake, AMEN!