



**“Answering the Call”**

**Sermon Title: “Called to Build”**

Preaching Text: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

24 January 2016

FUMC—Arlington, Texas 76011

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany

“I hope that while so many people are out smelling the flowers,  
someone is taking the time to plant some”

—Herbert Rappaport

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Our theme today is worship and Nehemiah is a fitting text for our consideration. Worship, like the book of Nehemiah, is a most mysterious issue. At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century churches were caught in a worship battle it couldn't win. A generation ago it was because the worship battle was neither biblical nor theological. Rather the battle was cultural. The church had few weapons with which to fight this particular cultural conflict. But today the battle about worship feels different. Now it is a matter of priority and practicality. In the olden days questions sounded like: What does God want? How do we please God? How can our community lift our voices in praise to God . . . and the like? Now the option for many is to opt out of worship.

Three questions about how people spend time and money influence today's culture. I have mentioned these before: Will my friends be there? Will I make any money? Will it be fun? These are not questions about duty, righteousness, or integrity. These are questions about practicality, self-serving, and utility. Often relationships are not about utility. Relationships with our spouse, close friends, and God are plainly not functional relations. Rather we sacrifice for these—we don't just see them as useful.

You may wonder why I said that the battle is neither theological nor biblical a moment ago and let me explain what I mean. Nowhere in theology or in the Bible are “correct methods” offered to instruct us on “how” to worship. Scripture guides us in many things, but little is said about the proper methods about the worship God. Some folks think that the organ is the only appropriate instrument for authentic worship. Yet down the street is a church that bans the

use of all musical instruments. Who is correct? Joseph Mohr once used a guitar to accompany Franz Gruber's beautiful worded hymn "Silent Night," Christmas Eve 1818. Thus, we will not solve the culture wars—that is, the organ verses the electric guitar, snakes verses balloons for Pentecost—but we can look at Nehemiah 8 today about worship. Hear our lesson:

1 All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. 2 Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. 3 He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law 5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6 Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. 8 So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. 9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. 10 Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10).

What is worship? We might say that worship is "the perfect honor paid to a loftier being." We could say worship means "to offer tribute, honor, veneration, respect, adoration, praise, or glory to a superior being." The Bible uses the word worship broadly to signify reverence offered to among other things: to idols, material things, or to the authentic God.

Worship itself is not strictly a sacred word. Rather it merely describes the devotion furnished to a higher being. The notion of worship is that people prostrate themselves before a superior being with a sense of respect, awe, reverence, honor, and homage. In a Christian context, we simply apply this to God and prostrate ourselves before God in respect and honor, paying God the glory due God's majestic character.

Chiefly worship is Christians, gathering on the Sabbath to honor God. We do not assemble to praise preacher, choir, building, program, or our Sunday school class. We gather to honor our creator and savior God. The sermon and the music simply spur our desire to honor God. So, if we go to church for what we can get as if worship is a buy-in for some blessing,

then we have missed the point. Worship focuses on God; not us. We give praise and adoration to God. We do not simply get something from God. Worship is an all-consuming yearning to offer ourselves and our best to God.

So what are some things we learn about worship from Nehemiah 8? **First**, the people of God worship together. Note what Nehemiah tells us: “All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate.” While Nehemiah is a Hebrew book, it is also part of the Christian list of biblical books. So, our lesson at the Water Gate reminds us that Christianity is relational. Certainly we are individuals. But we are also part of the body of Christ. God’s intent in giving us gifts graces is that we share them in community. As Paul reminds the Corinthians: “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). Accordingly when the people heard the law read publically, perhaps for the first time in a long time, they heard it read in community. They all gathered to hear! Worship is the time when the faith community gathers to share mutually as a people who hold the faith and their God in common.

**Second**, the people know that they have entered the presence of the living God. The people do not ask Ezra to speak *about* God. They ask him to read the Word *of* God. When Ezra opens the Torah, he prays, and the people lay face down on the ground because they recognize that they are in God’s holy presence. They stand for the reading of the law. Thus, God is not just the object of our worship; God is also the subject our worship, the living, Holy One whom we encounter in our worship.

The writer Annie Dillard vividly describes what worship might look like if we approached it as the people did in Nehemiah 8:

Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?... It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return (Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume).

This worship is a real encounter no matter how much we have domesticated it.

**Third** and last, what we see in Nehemiah 8 is worship that transforms lives. I remember hearing somewhere that we are what we eat. I am not really sure what that means, but I do know that it is true that we become what we worship. Life that consumes lust and greed soon enough becomes lusty and greedy. The people who desire the worship of God are the kinds of people with whom we wish to spend our time. Plato purportedly once said, “People are like dirt. They can both nourish you and help you grow as a person or they can stunt your growth and make you wilt and die.” The people we spend our time with influence our behavior, speech, manners, interests, outlook, and enthusiasm. Peer pressure is a real pull in our lives and those who worship regularly will be a positive influence upon us and our families.

Paul understood the need for the church community because he made it his life. Paul wrote: “God will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself (Philippians 3:21). That is God transforms us in many ways, but one of the primary ways is in the sacred worship of God. I have a pastor friend (David Jones, FUMC, Decatur, GA) who gives a little speech when he offers fifth graders their Bibles from the church:

Young people, this is a Bible. A Bible is a book filled with stories of people who have met God. Those people are our people. Their stories are our stories. We read their stories because we want to remember that this is who God is, this is who we are, and this is what we believe. So this is how we will live.

I would like to say that this is what worship does for us too!

*Let us pray: Living and loving God, you have made yourself known to us in many and various ways. We're grateful today for the ability to worship you and by which you reveal yourself to us. Keep our eyes open to see you, our ears open to hear you, our minds open to understand you, and our hearts open to sense you. Amen.*