

The Gift of Scripture
By Rev. Ridgley Joyner
Nehemiah 8:1-11

Last week we started our sermon series after the feast of Epiphany focusing on gift giving—but with a twist. In these following weeks leading up to Lent, we will be walking through the lectionary texts through the lens of gifts—the gifts of our faith—some we love, some we'd never thought we'd need, and some that are just plain challenging.

Last week we read from Paul's letter to the Corinthians looking at the gift of community. Paul reminded us that each of us are unified in the sheer proclamation (only by the grace of God) that "Jesus is Lord" Faith itself is a gift from the spirit bestowing us with unique qualities and strengths that we can use to serve God for the *good* of the community. Our service to the community is not simply out of duty, to uplift us or check off a box. Our service to the community is a way to respond to God out of gratitude and it seeks a relationship, not simply serving a need but serving a person.

This week we are invited into a book in the Old Testament that the lectionary does not lead us to often. The book of Nehemiah is immediately following the book of Ezra and biblical scholars believe that when the Bible was canonized, that these two books were split from one. Ezra was a scribe and Nehemiah, a governor. Today we read of a celebration after the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt. This is spiritual renewal of sorts for the people of God-- a festival for 7 days followed by a celebration of the feast of booths to remember God's faithfulness from the Exodus and the wilderness journey. They confess their sins, renew their faithfulness to God's covenant, and vow oncemore to follow the Torah. This is a service of worship commemorating the return to Jerusalem for some of the Israelites after the Babylonian Exile.

We know from countless texts in the Old Testament that exile was a challenging time for God's people. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and they were displaced. Where they once saw God in their identity as a chosen and blessed people, a strong nation was no more. The Babylonians invaded Judah and stripped them of everything that connected them to their God.

It was there in generations of exile, that God's people began to understand God's presence in a new way—in a sacred temple, but also through the sacred texts, Their understanding of God became a God who was moving about among them even when they found themselves scattered and displaced. The Babylonian Exile ended with King Cyrus the Great's reign and God's people were able to return and rebuild Jerusalem. After the walls and the new temple are constructed, we find ourselves here at a service of remembering God's faithfulness, and commemorating a new chapter.

One of the first things Ezra does is read from the sacred texts—the Torah. Texts that were passed down by oral tradition written on scrolls. Texts that sustained them when they perhaps needed it most. We learn in verse 9 that when this happened, the people of God wept. We don't know why they are overcome with emotion. Perhaps it is the sheer day—the ceremony,

the excitement. Perhaps there were tears of relief, tears of heartbreak reflecting back on the grief of their years of suffering in exile, what was, what could have been. Maybe the tears were tears of joy. God's people are moved to emotion from the reading of God's word.

Scripture is a Gift of faith. If it wasn't, we wouldn't have it painted on wooden pallets and hung on our walls as décor, we wouldn't buy greeting cards with verses printed on them, we wouldn't send them to our college students in care packages. We rely on these texts for comfort, much needed reminders, sustenance, and nourishment. We are lucky to have a text that we can own, that we can return to over and over again to point us to God. This sacred book is full of stories of God's broken people living lives full of joy sorrow wonder and suffering. Yet, the sacred part of it is that God is woven throughout all the stories of God's people. Teaching us anew every time we open it to the nature of our Good and Great God. Inspiring us anew to live into who God is calling us to be here today.

But so often it stops there. Sometimes our Bibles become dusty on a bookshelf and our reading of it is in worship where we want the bible to remind us that God loves us, to remind us of comfort, to uplift us and inspire us and make us feel good for the coming week. Or we even cherry pick texts to remind us that we are right about a moral or political view, God gives us what we want, or answers our prayers the way we want our prayers answered. So often this sacred text is used as a weapon to keep certain cultural codes in place by literal interpretation of verses out of context.

The gift of Scripture is that it extends **beyond** our limits and shortsightedness. Sometimes the very gift of scripture allowing it to provoke us, reading further than we want to read, engaging texts that challenge the roots of our cultural codes. Reading passages about things that inspire or uplift us in ways we wouldn't imagine. The gift of provoking. The gift of discomfort, the gift of heartbreaking hope. The gift of unanswered prayers and mystery.

We started our new year with the spiritual practice of Star Words. Now this may be new to some of you. Star Words are simply paper stars with words printed on them. Our congregation was invited to choose a star and here's the hard part—to keep the first one you pick. This star is to live with you for the year. For you to return to it time and time again. To be attune to this word. To see how it is used in the bible—what bible passages use this word. What it can mean in other languages—how we use it today, and how your experiences might change your understanding of this word over the year. Dwelling with this single word is our spiritual practice.

Back in 2016, the Presbyterian Outlook (or denomination's magazine) published an article about a presbyterian pastor in Youngstown, Ohio who reflected on the spiritual practice of Star Words at her church. Rev. Stroble shares this:

“On the Sunday we celebrate Epiphany at the church I serve, it has become a tradition to pass out “star words.” Perhaps you've heard of them. This practice of passing out star words has grown in popularity recently. On the day that we remember the star that led the magi to Jesus,

we pass out pieces of paper cut into star shapes with a printed word. What I didn't realize three years ago when we first passed out these stars was the impact they would have on my life and my church.

My first word was RESTRAINT. I wanted to throw it back. What was that supposed to mean? RESTRAINT made me think about being held back or being bound. These words were supposed to be a gift, but this did not feel like one to me. And yet, over time the word continued to work on my heart and mind. I started practicing RESTRAINT at church coffee hours and forgoing doughnuts. I used RESTRAINT to stop myself from getting second helpings at potlucks. RESTRAINT gave me permission to look at how unhealthy I had become and do something about it. When I began to see RESTRAINT as a gift instead of a curse, it freed me to change my eating habits without apology, to leave work earlier to exercise and to focus not just on my spiritual health but my physical health. Instead of making a resolution that I'll feel guilty about a week later, I take a star word as a gift and keep my eyes open. The stars have allowed me to see God in unexpected ways and places. They've been challenging, life-giving and transformative.

One woman in my congregation received JOY last year. Her middle name is JOY. She admits, though, that she had lost her JOY, forgotten how to live with JOY. The star word reminded her throughout the year about the gift of JOY in all circumstances of life; a JOY that comes from the simple affirmation that we belong to God. Another member received COURAGE. She was in the midst of cancer treatments when this word was given to her. She took that paper star with her to every doctor appointment. She kept the word by her side as she entered hospice care and as she passed from this life to the next.”¹

Maybe for you the first word you chose was one you rolled your eyes at. I felt this last year too when our youth drew star words last January. I chose Bravery, and it has certainly challenged me over this year—especially in the final 6 weeks of 2021 when I suddenly had to muster up some serious courage to do things I had never done before as a pastor.

Your star word may be something that is challenging for you, or provoking. But I encourage you to dwell with the discomfort and see how God's spirit is inviting you to understand something you always thought you knew in a new way.

In the same way I believe that we are called to dwell with God's word. Day in and day out. We can so often seek out the comforting words in scripture, those that don't challenge or provoke us—and flip past the scriptures that make us uncomfortable. We can even jump to interpret scripture in ways that make us feel good and affirm us when really God's word to us might be calling us into something more. It is when we have the courage to venture into scripture open to what God wants us to learn and not what we hope to learn that it is a gift to us as well.

We believe that scripture is a living document, meaning that yes we read the same stories and passages year after year but they are new to us each and every time because God's spirit

¹ <https://pres-outlook.org/2016/01/star-words-a-spiritual-practice-for-epiphany/>

breathes through it and us, teaching us, moving us to weep. This book is more than the pages it is bound upon or even the words someone wrote after many years of oral tradition. It is a living word that points us to a God who loves us, challenges us, and teaches us. Thanks be to God for a gift like that.