

## **It's Time for a Party: The Faithfulness of God**

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Nehemiah 8:9-12; 16-18

*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. 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." So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them. Nehemiah 8:9-12 (NRSV)*

*So the people went out and brought them, and made booths[a] for themselves, each on the roofs of their houses, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them; for from the days of Jeshua son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the festival seven days; and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance. Nehemiah 8:16-18 (NRSV)*

I've got to ask you all a question – what did the turkey say to the turkey hunter on Thanksgiving Day? He said, "Quack! Quack!" Do you get it? He was trying to pretend he was a duck so he wouldn't get shot.

It's always bad when you have to explain the joke, and I suspect that some of you needed an explanation.

Okay, let's start with a prayer.

*Gracious God open us up. Open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear, open our hearts that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

Every culture has some sort of harvest celebration, and we have Thanksgiving. It comes in the fall at the time of harvest. Well, the Jewish culture has Succoth, and it's also called the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Ingathering. What they do is build booths and sleep in them overnight, and sometimes they're placed on their roof or in front of their homes, and that's been an ancient tradition. It's one of the three pilgrimage feasts that the Scripture talks about where the people from all over Israel had to come to Jerusalem. They had to be there at the place of the temple.

Here's the context for today's Scripture. There's some history here, so just hang on, and I'll move through that as quickly as I can. In the year 587 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple and the city, and carried the people of Israel away to Babylon, where they were in exile. In 539 BC, King Cyrus of Persia conquered Babylon, and so that begins what we call the Persian Period. King Cyrus of Persia allowed the people of Israel, even though they remained under Persian rule, to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city. He appointed a man named Nehemiah to be the governor, and Ezra was the priest. The two of them led the people back to Israel and rebuilt the city, rebuilt the walls around the city of Jerusalem, rebuilt the temple – they built a new temple called the Second Temple – Ezra's and Nehemiah's temple. When that was done, and the whole city had been rebuilt again, he called the people together, and he read from the law, probably what we now have as the Book of Deuteronomy because it had been found about a hundred years earlier in the walls of the temple. He read to them the law and the people all began to weep because they realized that they had not been following the law and that they had strayed. And over the time of the exile, they had drifted away, and they began to weep. Nehemiah said to them, "This is not a time for weeping. This is a time for celebration. This is a party! Because God has been faithful to us."

The next day began the Feast of Booths – the Feast of Ingathering. He said, "We're going to build booths again like we used to, so we'll remember." The Feast of Booths was a way to remember that God had provided for them in the wilderness, that in that time they had to live in shelters, in booths in the wilderness. They had no homes because they were wandering. God was faithful and provided for them, anyway. And he said, "We have been in exile, but God has

provided for us anyway, and we're going to celebrate that!" So, they began the Feast of Booths and had this amazing party.

I thought we might see if we can take this apart a little bit and see how it might apply to us here in this year 2020 and what we can take hold of as we head into our celebration of the feast of Thanksgiving. Our time of celebrating the Ingathering.

I want to give you five things, so pay attention, and I'll try and move through them as quickly as I can. The first thing is that when we understand the faithfulness of God, we learn to gaze with gratitude. We learn to see things differently when we understand the faithfulness of God.

I want you to listen to the Scripture again. Here's what Nehemiah said to them: "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep." For the people had wept when they heard the words of the law." The first thing he does is reset their mindset – change their attitude. He says, "This isn't a time for weeping; this is a time for joy." We have to learn to see things differently, to gaze with gratitude.

There is a children's book by Kimberly and James Dean called *Pete the Cat and His Magic Sunglasses*, and it's a wonderful little book. It goes this way. Pete, the cat, is having a really, really bad day, and he's bummed out, sad and grumpy, and Grumpy Toad comes across him and says, "Hey, Pete, I found these incredible sunglasses. Put 'em on!" So, Pete puts on the magic sunglasses, and he looks around, and everything looks different. Pete says, "Wow! The sky is blue, and it's beautiful. The trees are green, and it's a wonderful day! These are magic sunglasses." And he's pumped about it. Pete gets on his skateboard, and he goes along, and then he meets first the squirrel. He shares with him the magic sunglasses since the squirrel was having a bad day, too. Then he meets the turtle who's lying on his back and can't get up. The turtle says, "I'm upside down today." And Pete says, "Here are these magic sunglasses, and everything looks better with them." The turtle puts them on, and he says, "Wow! Everything's much better!"

Then Pete moves along and meets an alligator who's having a tough day. He gives him the magic sunglasses, and the alligator thinks they're awesome. Then Pete the Cat continues on his skateboard, and he has this terrible accident, a tragic accident in which the sunglasses are shattered. He says, "Oh, no, my life is going to be terrible again!" And the wise owl shows up and says, "Pete, you don't need those sunglasses. All you must do is look for the good all the time."

Friends, it's a simplistic book, but there's so much truth in there. We get in the habit of looking for things that are wrong or bad, and as we go through more difficult times, we find ourselves being drawn to that even more.

During this year of 2020, I have found myself slipping into thinking, "Well, it's 2020, and everything's going to be bad." And every time we come across a challenge in a staff meeting, one of us will say, "Well, what do you expect – it's 2020." And we begin to get into what I call "2020 Vision." It's not a good thing. This 2020 Vision is where you see everything in this context that it must be a bad year.

Now, yes, there are some bad things, and we'll talk about that a little later, but the truth is that so much of it is about our perspective. Nehemiah changes their perspective on a dime. He says, "This isn't a time for grieving! No, this is a time to celebrate!" We've got to choose to gaze with gratitude, to look for the good.

Here's the second thing. We have to learn to gush with gratitude. When we understand the faithfulness of God, there is this joy that arises out of the gratitude that we feel for the faithfulness of God. This rejoicing that comes up. It says in verse twelve: "And the people went their way to eat and drink and send portions and to make great rejoicing because they had understood the words that were declared to them." It closes in verse seventeen: "And there was very great rejoicing." This joy that comes up inside us.

When I am uninspired and sometimes just really dry in my preaching, I turn to Frederick Buechner. I've spoken before about how he is my favorite Christian author. I was reading his book *The Hungering Dark*, and it's a collection of sermons and messages. Here's what he writes in one of them: "There is not one of us whose life has not already been touched somewhere with joy. So that in order to make it real to us to show it forth, it should be enough for Jesus simply to remind us of it. To make us remember the joyous moments of our lives. Yet this is not easy because, ironically enough, these are likely to be precisely the moments that we do not associate with religion. We tend to think that joy is not properly religious but that it is the opposite of religion. We tend to think that religion is sitting stiff and antiseptic and a little bored. And that joy is laughter and freedom and reaching out our arms to embrace the whole wide and preposterous earth, which is so beautiful that sometimes it nearly breaks our hearts. We need to be reminded that at its heart Christianity is joy and that it's laughter and that it's freedom and the reaching out of arms are the essence of it. That joy is always all-encompassing. There is nothing

of us left over to hate or to be afraid with or to feel guilty with or be selfish about. Joy is where the whole being is pointed in one direction. And it is something that, by its nature, a man never hoards but always wants to share. What Jesus is saying is that we are made for joy and that anyone who is truly joyous has a right to say that he is doing God's will on this earth. Where you have known joy, you have known him."

Christianity – the amazing grace of God – the faithfulness of God plants in our hearts a joy that just rises up and bubbles over with gratitude.

I used to have a mug that was given to me as a youth pastor – until I dropped it and it broke. I loved it. It said, "The joy of the Lord is my strength." It comes from this very Scripture that we read today. "The joy of the Lord is my strength." That there is inside of us this incredible joy. And that joy is linked to gratitude.

Brene Brown, who's done so much research, talked about the fact that what she discovered was that this joy and gratitude were so closely linked. And that causal link works in a way that she didn't expect. She writes this: "The relationship between joy and gratitude was one of the important things I found in my research. I wasn't expecting it. In my twelve years of research on 11,000 pieces of data, I did not interview one person who had described themselves as joyful, who also did not actively practice gratitude. For me, it was very counter-intuitive because I went into the research thinking that the relationship between joy and gratitude was if you're joyful, you should be grateful, but it wasn't that way at all. Instead, practicing gratitude invites joy into our lives."

When we understand God's faithfulness, we are overcome with gratitude, and that gratitude produces this bubbling joy, this gush. We gush with gratitude.

Here's the third thing. When we understand the faithfulness of God, we give with gratitude. Here's what he said, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of those to them for whom nothing is prepared. For this day is holy to our Lord."

When we understand the faithfulness of God, it prompts us to want to be generous and to give. Our PX Project this year made an offer to anyone who wanted to, to provide Thanksgiving dinner for them. You can buy your Thanksgiving dinner from Chef Adam, and the PX Project is our workforce development program in a culinary setting. They provide Thanksgiving for you for a price. But part of that price was to go to provide Thanksgiving dinners for people in the Gulfton-Sharpstown neighborhood who didn't have the resources for Thanksgiving dinner.

Every other year we'd have a big Thanksgiving feast for 300 people that would gather together, and they were the new arrivals into the United States, sort of a replay of the Pilgrims and Native Americans who gathered for the new people in the United States. We'd have 300 people for this wonderful Thanksgiving feast. But we couldn't do that this year because of COVID, and so this year, the idea was to just provide the resources people needed to have their own Thanksgiving dinners in their own homes. We called it "Buy a meal, share a meal." That's the picture we have of what giving with gratitude is. That when we give, we are saying, "Yes, I'm thankful, God, for how you've been faithful, I'm also going to give to others."

I don't know if you know the story of Tony Dill because it's such a touching story. He was a farmer in West Texas, and he was very active in his community and had been an advocate for farm bills. But he died of COVID this year, and he died right at the harvest time. He had 2000 acres of cotton that needed to be harvested. So, what did the community do? All the other farmers in the community brought their equipment and all their stuff, and in one fell swoop, they harvested all the cotton and took it to market. It was so the family would have what they needed. I just loved what his daughter said. She said, "We are just so grateful. So grateful." And his son said, "It sure makes you glad to live in Texas." Because that's how we do things here, we want to give of ourselves when we understand what God has done for us, it prompts us to respond by giving of ourselves to others. We give ourselves away.

We gaze with gratitude; we gush with gratitude, we give with gratitude, and here's the next one. And it can be a little more challenging, maybe, a little more difficult to sort of get. We can gripe with gratitude. We even can gripe with gratitude.

Why did they build booths? They did that so they could say, "We have to remember the hard times, and we had some really hard times. We wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, and we had to live in booths. But God was faithful anyway. Nehemiah says we're going to build booths because we've been in exile. 'By the waters of Babylon, we lay down and wept for thee, Zion.' But God was faithful anyway. And God was with us even then."

Look, I'm one of those people who, I guess, was shaped to not want anything negative. I guess I felt it was an attack on me, so when my kids were growing up, I never wanted them to express any dissatisfaction or whining or griping or complaining. It just upset me so much. If I were scolding them, and they'd cry, I'd say, "Why are you crying?" And they'd say, "Well, Dad, I'm crying because you're yelling at me!" But I realized what a mistake that is to say to people

that you can't express anything negative. When we are in hard times, yes, we want to gaze and see the good and focus on the good, but there are brokenness and pain in our lives. We need to be able to share that, and our God is not a God who says, "No whining!" Our God is not a God who says, "You better not complain because you know how good I've been to you." No, our God is a God who invites us to honestly share our hearts with him, even when those hearts are broken.

There is a whole group of Psalms called the Laments, and they just cry out to God, where the writers say, "God, I'm in a mess, I'm going under here. Everything is going wrong in my life, and you are the only one I have to turn to." There is built into them gratefulness for God to be still present.

A few years ago, an employee from our church came to see me. She's no longer on our staff, so you don't need to try to figure out who it is. She came to see me, and she was really upset, angry, felt she'd been treated wrongly. She was really angry and upset. She let me have it – she let me have it with both barrels! She ranted and raved and cried. I listened, and I tried to understand, and I asked questions to try and understand what had happened and why it was so upsetting to her. In the back of my mind, the whole time, what I was thinking was, I was trying to push it aside, but I was thinking, "Who do you think you are coming in and yelling at me like this? You think this is going to help you?"

But when we were done and after she'd let it all out, she said, "Thanks for listening, I knew you would." I thought to myself, "You know, I'm grateful we have a God who doesn't say, 'Who do you think you are?' We have a God who is compassionate and cares and listens to our laments, our sadness, our anger. Then we can gripe with gratitude and can still say at the end, 'Thank you for listening.'"

We gaze, and we gush, and we give, and we gripe – all with gratitude. The last one is that we grow in gratitude. When we understand the faithfulness of God, we grow in understanding that faithfulness, and we grow in our gratitude for it.

Why did he have them reinstate this Feast of Booths? I love what he's saying; it's "We haven't been doing this. We should have been doing this. We're going to come back again, and we're going to start celebrating this Feast of Booths every year to remember what God has done for us. We're going to get better at this."

My wife got a text message from one of my daughters some time ago, and my daughter now has her own children, so she said, “Mom, I never thanked you enough for all that you did, so I’m so sorry that I spit toothpaste on the mirror.” And one of the other girls texted, “I’m sorry I left all of my stuff down at the bottom of the stairs all the time. And I never put my dish in the dishwasher.” And they all went on with this kind of thing. One said, “I’m sorry that I never thanked you for taking me to a hundred soccer practices.” They were saying, “I knew it was hard and that you must have felt unappreciated. So, I needed to thank you.”

I think it’s so great when your kids become parents then they get a little taste of what you had, and they mature. They grow in their gratitude for how you were as a parent. I think we do that in our faith life, too. That as we get older, we see the world in a little different way. And we’re just more grateful.

One of the greatest privileges of being a pastor is being with people in the last years of their lives. Often, they will maybe know that their time is short; they may even have had a diagnosis that makes them realize that. They may not know when, but they know how they’ll pass away. And as I have the opportunity to talk to them and hear them reflect on life, what I find is that they have all sorts of feelings. They might feel regret or grief – lots of grief – and sadness and fear. Fear is surely there, too. But sort of spanning all of that almost to a person, there is just this overwhelming gratitude. That life is a gift, and they’ve had a good life, and they’re so grateful for it. They’re grateful that God has been with them through all of it. As they’ve aged, they have grown in gratitude.

I think we can do that every day.

So, this Thanksgiving I want to challenge you. Take this Succoth as a model, and learn to gaze and to gush, and to give, and even to gripe as you grow in gratitude.

Let’s pray together. *Gracious God, you have been so faithful to us. When our eyes are opened, and we understand that it just changes everything for us. So, God, let us pour out our hearts to you in gratitude this year - to see things in a different way. To let that joy just bubble up over and inside us to give of ourselves to others. Even if we must, to gripe to you, grateful that you are the God who will listen. And just continue, God, to grow us in faith and especially in gratitude. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*