

Thomas R. Cook  
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
10:00 a.m. Celebration of Holy Eucharist  
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany; January 27, 2019

## “Remember”

Scripture: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 (3 Epiphany C, RCL)

Note: A sermon for the Annual Meeting of the Parish, being my 4th opportunity to speak as Rector.

I was overjoyed this week to approach my fourth opportunity to speak with the community of St. Stephen's Church gathered in Annual Meeting this morning, so I turned to the Holy Scriptures appointed for the day, upbeat to prepare my remarks for you, to tell you all sorts of stories and reports and data on the life of the church. And then I read from the Book of Nehemiah, and it told me that long ago the whole community of the Israelites was gathered outdoors in Jerusalem to hear the words of the Bible and the Law of Moses, —kind of like an Annual Meeting, I thought... that's pretty impressive— and the next thing I knew... everybody was crying. Just like that. The whole congregation of Israel heard the Scriptures, and they started crying. I mean, when is the last time that hearing the Bible made you cry? I didn't notice anyone breaking out the Kleenex while Amelia was delivering the words of the Gospel. I didn't see a single tear amongst us.

But have you ever lost something so dear to you, or perhaps you feared that you had lost something so dear to you, only to find that what was lost never really was

lost entirely? And that something you love, something important to you, remains with you even when you thought it might be gone... forever? When those Israelites gathered to hear the words of the Holy Scriptures, you have to know that... they had come home. For some three generations, those people had been scattered by war, their elders had seen their beloved city, their homes, their places of worship destroyed by invaders, their families had been torn apart, and they had been dragged off to live in faraway and foreign lands amongst people they did not know with customs they did not understand. They were uprooted from their history, deliberately, by others... displaced from their past, unmoored from their faith, and unsure of their future. And when after so many years they finally had the opportunity to return to their beloved city of Jerusalem, when they finally heard again the ancient words of the Law of Moses that had so deeply and dearly formed them and their ancestors as a people, when many who were gathered there saw their homeland for the first time, and saw the crumbled remains of their Temple for the first time, and heard the words of belonging and instruction and faith they had learned from their parents and grandparents in a faraway place, they were all so deeply moved... even to tears. What they feared was lost forever was with them again. And the words of the Scriptures revived in their hearts, and they were reminded of the people who came before them who had loved them in faith, formed them in faith. And of course they wept. They

remembered the One to whom they belonged... always and forever. They remembered who they were. They were home.

There is truth to the old adage —is there not?— that the only thing that never changes is the constant reality... of change. Things do not stay the same. And that is the nature of life in this world, and perhaps it is the peculiar secret to life in this world, because, thank God, change requires us to care about things. When something matters to us, but it cannot stay the same, change calls us to think anew, to dream of new things, to relate to one another in new ways, to grieve what is lost, even as we remember our joys and our foundations in faith of old. Change can be for the better, and change can be for the worse, and we must dwell in the midst of it all. But we must remember that which is important, that which is good and right, that which gives life. We must remember to love each other through times of change, whether change for good or for ill. And when we struggle and when we suffer for change, the loss of what we have known, and the uncertainty of what lies ahead, it is often the simple things of faith that renew our hope and our energy... the things we remember and value, like the familiar words of the Christmas story that you here every year, or the Deacon reading to us from the Bible, or a song from the children's choir, a baby presented for baptism at the creek, lilies everywhere at Easter, someone serving us the bread and wine of Holy Communion, a cup of coffee with friends after a service of

worship, a visit at hospital from a minister or friend, sharing food and fellowship with someone in need, receiving the care of others when we need it, and hearing “Alleluia” proclaimed even at graveside.

In a little while, we will gather as a community in Annual Meeting to hear about our life together. You’ll get all sorts of reports on what we’re doing and how we’re paying for it. You’ll hear about the work of Vestry and committees and ministries and staff. You’ll see photos and slides and bylaws and... all that sort of meeting stuff. You will learn of a congregation leaning to health and greater stability. You will see newer people, and people who have been here long enough to share a pew with their great-grandchildren. But before that, we will pray for our faith family, for those baptized, confirmed and buried this past year... all signs of the inevitable changes in our life together redeemed by God’s purpose working in our lives. We will share a meal of faith in Holy Communion, and then we’ll share just a good old regular breakfast.

But what I want us to remember this morning is that through thick and thin, St. Stephen’s Church is called to be a witness for God in this world, when we are well and stable and when we struggle with challenge and change, pro complacency. We are so blessed to have our church home and to have each other. And it’s by the grace of

God that we enjoy these things, and it will be by the grace of God that we discern new ministries before us while sustaining our memory of what we are and whose we are and why we are. Perhaps we won't cry each time we hear the Holy Scriptures, but I think it's okay if sometimes we do. Because they matter. If we're listening at all, they are shaping us into what God would have us become. And they remind us of the love God has for us and for those who have come before us and those for whom we are preparing this community to welcome when we are long gone. Doesn't matter whether you have been here forever or a few days... we are so blessed as a family in God. And when you think about it, that can bring some tears to your eyes.

But do not be grieved, people of St. Stephen's Church, for just as Nehemiah said to the people Israel so very long ago... "...the joy of the Lord is our strength." Now. Always.

Hope to see you at the Annual Meeting.