

A different day than we imagined (Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10)

This isn't the day we envisioned, but it is holy because God is in it.

by [Katie Hines-Shah](#)

January 21, 2022

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

Way back, almost two years ago, we imagined what a return from COVID would look like in our churches. The pews would be packed. Offering plates and Sunday schools would be full. Mission projects would be successful. We would all be singing.

We were so naïve.

Most of us have returned to in-person gatherings, but they aren't exactly the grand events we'd envisioned. Vaccine hesitancy, breakthrough infections, overcrowded hospitals, and limited treatments changed our plans. Some people are not yet ready to come back; others have lost interest in organized religion. Some moved away or even died. To be sure, new members have joined our congregations, too. But most churches have experienced decreased attendance, less money in the offering plate, fewer children, and more questions about how to return from our COVID exile.

It's a good thing God's people have been here before.

Nehemiah and Ezra tell the story of the return of the Hebrew people from exile in Babylon. The return seems like an answer to prayer—and then cold reality sets in. Finally allowed to enter Jerusalem, the people discover their temple in ruins, their city in shambles, and divisions within and without the crumbling walls. Most of the two books are consumed with the work of rebuilding both the temple and the city wall.

But there's another construction project underway: Ezra and the priests have been curating scripture, assembling the precursor of the Torah. In the reading assigned for this Sunday they read it to the people for the first time.

But when God's people hear the word proclaimed, they don't celebrate. They mourn and weep.

Nehemiah doesn't explain why the people respond the way they do. Perhaps they mourn their sin revealed in scripture. Perhaps it's been so long since they have heard the word, they can't help but respond emotionally.

Or maybe it's something else entirely. Perhaps the people gathered at the Water Gate hear the word and suddenly realize that the halcyon days of David and the united kingdom are past. Maybe they finally understand that hard work and uncertain outcomes lie ahead. Maybe they know there may be no return to normal after all.

I think we have all felt griefs like these during this strange season. We have made missteps for which we mourn. We have felt the deep emotion of reconnection after such a long time apart. (The first time my congregation sang in worship there wasn't a dry eye in the house.)

But our grief might also stem from a third source: we are all coming to realize a glorious return to the era of Christendom is not in the cards. It can feel like all that lies ahead is work and uncertainty; that weeping and mourning are the new normal.

But the work of the word is not yet complete.

Nehemiah, Ezra, and the Levites don't let grief have the final say. It may be comforting for a preacher to hear that even when scripture was new it needed interpreting. The leaders of Jerusalem explain, "This day is holy to the Lord your God." God, it turns out, does not despise the Hebrew people's incomplete wall or smaller temple. God is not waiting for safety, prosperity, and peace before reentering the people's story. Indeed, God was with the people in exile. God will be with them in and through the return. God who creates light with a word, who speaks and causes kings and armies to fall, whose word lifts up the broken and downtrodden, says the day is holy.

And so it is.

The pandemic may or may not be almost over. The people in our congregations may or may not return. Our churches may do many wonderful things, even if they do not return to glory days gone by. Our churches may even die. But this day is still holy, because God says so. God is not waiting for the pews and plates to be filled, for the Sunday school to be bustling or the music uplifting. God is here now, calling God's people to "eat the fat and drink the sweet wine," to celebrate the goodness of God.

Our celebrations must by necessity stretch beyond our walls. Portions must be allotted for those who have nothing, in our day as in Nehemiah's. The word speaks service to our neighbor in need, and meeting them is a cure for our naiveté. Success was never the promise, but God's presence always has been and always will be.

It isn't the day we envisioned, but it is holy because God is in it.