

January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022

## Nehemiah 8:1-10 “Interpreting the Word”

When it comes to recreational reading or movies, I’m partial to the dystopian future genre. *The Hunger Games*, George Orwell’s *1984*, *The Book of Eli* and *The Matrix* are some of my favorites. I’m partial to the works of Philip K. Dick which includes *Blade Runner*, *Minority Report*, and *Total Recall*. Last week I was talking about things that Mary and I had in common, but I will guarantee you that dystopian entertainment is something we definitely *do not* have in common. But then again, she tends to be more of a glass half-full person while I lean towards the glass half-empty. She’d much rather watch *Star Trek* which paints a more positive and *utopian* picture of the future. And here’s the thing, we both like *Star Trek* and we both like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, but given the choice, my foot is in the dystopian camp while hers is in the utopian camp. The purpose of both genres is to show readers and viewers where current events could potentially lead us. Do we as global citizens unite in a spirit of cooperation and explore strange new worlds and boldly go where no one has gone before as in *Star Trek*? Or do we devolve into bands of marauding gangs on a scorched, war-torn earth and fight over dwindling natural resources like *Mad Max*? Problem is, I think we could go either way right now. But, as much as I like dystopian stories, I really do want a happy ending. I just like to wade through the muck a little before we get to the happy ending.

A sub-genre of dystopian future is dystopian alternative history. This is a genre that asks the question, “What if?” In fact, there’s a show on the Disney Plus channel right now called *What If* that explores how one seemingly small change in an event that has already occurred could have a huge rippling impact on the outcome of history. I think one of the most disturbing examples of this genre is *The Man in the High Castle* on Amazon Prime. The “what if” question for this show is, “What if the axis powers of Germany and Japan were victorious in World War II?” I watched two episodes of that show and gave up. Because for me it was

just too close to home. There's too many people still alive today who lived through World War II who would quite frankly find it offensive.

My idea for a dystopian alternative history goes back a little further in time. My story would take place during the American Civil War. This was a time when our nation was so deeply divided that we were willing to take up arms against each other. I've always wondered why an outside nation like France or England didn't swoop in and overtake us during such a vulnerable time. The fact that there was a vast ocean separating Europe and the states probably had something to do with this. In *my* dystopian alternative history, I'd have Canada be the country that swooped in and took advantage of our division. They'd come in, overwhelm and conquer our fractured military, sack Washington DC and Richmond then slowly take the political leaders, religious leaders, corporate leaders, and military leaders up to Ontario until there was no one left in the states to offer any resistance. Now being Canadians, they'd do it politely and apologetically, of course, but sometimes you've got to stretch your imagination a little to make dystopian alternative history work. Then I'd have a sub-plot about how some of these exiled Americans started liking Canadian culture and never wanted to go back. But then I'd have these wandering speakers ... prophets if you will ... who would travel up to Canada and lay guilt trips on the exiles who were okay with becoming Canadians. Then these prophets would start calling for the majority who missed the states to unite and to pray for their eventual return home.

Meanwhile the Central American countries would come together and start marching North where they'd take the states back from Canada and eventually travel far enough north to conquer all of Canada. Then they'd see how many former citizens of the U.S. were there and how much they regretted the divisions that led them to this conundrum in the first place. Partly out of pity and partly so they could maintain some control over the land, the Central Americans would allow the former U.S. citizens to return home and govern themselves. The Central Americans would help re-build Washington DC, then they'd have a big

rally at the newly built capital where there would be a public reading of the US Constitution. “We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union ...” and that’s where the tears start ... when people remember their purpose and lament their mistakes as they repent of the sins that caused their people to be divided.

Here’s the thing though ... if I ever wrote this story, I’d get busted for plagiarism because I’d be using the plot from the Books of Kings and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Bible. Except in the Bible, Israel is the United States, Babylon is Canada, the Central American countries are Persia, and the US Constitution is the Law of Moses. You can see how that’s a big problem, right? That’s why I threw the idea out the window. But ... I wanted to give you something that you can get your heads wrapped around just to put our scripture into context.

In the passage Kathy read, Ezra, a priest who encouraged the Israelites in Babylon to observe the Law of Moses, stood before the people of Israel at the newly reconstructed walls of Jerusalem and read from the Torah. The walls were the last thing to be rebuilt in Jerusalem. It was part of a 13-year reconstruction project after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem over 70 years ago. It was an emotional moment. Jerusalem had finally been rebuilt. Now the People of God could be united once again and start fresh. The exile was finally over, and God’s promises had at last been fulfilled. Now they could repent of their sins that led their nation to be divided and conquered.

The place where they gathered to hear the Law read was called the Water Gate. Typically, the Law was only read in public at the Temple after a rite of ritual purification. The Water Gate, though, was a place where the general public was welcome to gather; both the clean and unclean ... the ritually pure and un-pure. In other words, all were welcome. Sound familiar? The word “all” is used nine times in this passage which means the writer wanted to emphasize that this gathering was meant to be inclusive.

Another interesting thing about this passage is who called this meeting. It wasn't Nehemiah, the governor of Persian Judea. It wasn't a priest or a religious leader. It was the *people*. The people were the ones who called for Ezra to read the Law. When they heard the words of the Law they wept because it had been decades since they were able to gather together like this to hear the Law read. God's people had been through a terrible time of attack, decline and exile and were finally able to reunite as a worshipping community. Because when they heard the words of the Law they responded by worshipping. They did not worship Nehemiah, the Persian governor responsible for rebuilding Jerusalem. They did not worship Ezra, the priest who was the keeper of the Law. They didn't even worship the words of the Law itself which is a trap that we humans often fall into when it comes to dealing with holy scripture. They worshipped God. And finally, when it was all over, Ezra sent them away with a call to action. He told them to go eat, drink and share with others who did not have anything to eat and drink.

This is a very important scripture that we often overlook because it's from a relatively obscure book in the Bible. It only shows up in the lectionary a handful of times during the three-year cycle. It's an inspiring story though. It's about new beginnings. It's about new opportunities and new chances for God's people to own up to their mistakes, to get back on track and finally get it right. It's the kind of story that makes your heart well up with pride. If Kathy had read all the way to the end of the chapter we would have seen where the people came to a big revelation that turned into a party. They said, "Oh, wait a minute here's something in the Law that we haven't been doing! There's this thanksgiving festival we've been missing out on where we're supposed to build little booths to camp out in for a week to celebrate the bounty of our harvests! Let's do this!" And they did it. And it was fun. What an inspiring way to end this story! That is until the people fell back into their old habits again. Their old divisions. Their old selfishness. Their old unfaithfulness. Their old prejudices. Their old desires to control and manipulate.

Good grief Jesse, you just couldn't do it could you? You couldn't just end this sermon on a happy note and leave it be. You had to go all dystopian and remind us how awful everything is and how awful we are. You now, you seriously need to reconsider what you're reading and watching because it sounds like you need to start binge watching some shows on the Hallmark channel! Okay. I get it. I'm not going to say I'm sorry, but I am going to leave you with some hope.

There is no doubt that we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. There is ample evidence that throughout history humans have been on this continuous loop of getting it right, then slipping up, then slipping up some more, then facing the consequences of our self-destructive actions. Then we feel bad about it, we seize the opportunity to repent then we get it right for a while, but then the cycle starts all over again. But there's one thing that we have learned over the centuries and that is every day is a new day with God. Every day God grants us a chance to start over. Every day is an opportunity to do the next right thing. And it starts with us. We are at a crucial place in the cycle when it comes to the decisions we make. Mad Max or Star Trek. Babylon or the Promise Land. You are not powerless when it comes to determining where we go from here. We are not in exile. The story of Israel's history is not lost. The story of Jesus is not lost. The story of the Holy Spirit acting through the apostles to build Christ's church is not lost. It's right here in our hands available to equip us and to put our faith into action. Break the cycle and be the people that God has called us to be.