

I was 14 years old when my brother David came home from a college basketball game. He was in rough shape after sustaining a concussion following a collision with another player. He could remember very little and I literally became his memory. “*What day is it? What happened? Why can’t I remember anything? Where am I?*” Every 15 minutes we cycled through this same routine. It was annoying, but even more so, I was afraid he might remain like this. I was afraid to go to sleep with him like this, but eventually I grew so tired, I wrote up the list of questions he kept asking along with the answers, and went to sleep. Fortunately, his impairment was short-lived, but it made me think about what it would be like to live without memory. His reality, in that moment, was wholly contained in what I was able to remember and write for him.

The story of the Old Testament is really a story of memory. Memory passed down through the ancestors, stories around the campfire, memories written down and preserved. It’s the story of God’s special relationship with the Israelites. Memory of their relationship to God bound the Israelites together. It also kept them close to God’s heart, reliant upon God, and responsive to God. God had given the Israelites a land flowing of milk and honey, security, abundance, prosperity. But as the years passed, the Israelites grew careless and cynical about their faith. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann writes that, “*Prosperity causes amnesia.*” They began to forget who they belonged to. People with amnesia don’t know who they are, what they’re expected to do, or to whom they’re accountable. This goes a long way toward explaining how the Israelites ended up in captivity in 6th century Babylonia BC. It is nearly 500 years before the time of Jesus. After 50 years in captivity, the Persians rose to power. Cyrus the Great, the Persian King told them they could go home. But by this time many of them had forgotten about their own religion. The return to Jerusalem was devastating. The walls of Jerusalem were in ruins. The temple was destroyed. The countryside was a wasteland. Ezra, a priest and scribe, and Nehemiah, a Jewish administrator, stepped up and organized a series of urban renewal projects. Nehemiah’s plan was to reconstruct the walls of the city of Jerusalem. That would give them a sense of security. Ezra’s plan was to rebuild the temple and the faith of the people. He understood that a right relationship with God was the only true source for security.

When the work was finished, everyone gathered in the town square. Even though they were safer, and they had a place to worship, their situation was still bleak. The Persians still dominated and taxed them heavily. External enemies still threatened them. Not to mention internal divisions and injustices. They needed guidance and assurance. Ezra came to read from a scroll he’d brought with him from Babylonia. He began to read the stories – stories of creation, of Noah & the Ark, of Abraham & Sarah, of Joseph & his coat of many colors, of God releasing them from Egyptian captivity, of Miriam & Moses, of the 10 Commandments, and of God’s instructions for creating community. Their memory, as a people, was restored to them through the gathering of community, through the reading of holy scripture.

Re—membering –. Isn’t this what we do when we gather for worship, when the community gathers to hear the word of God, there is actually something holy going on – there is a tension when we come in the sanctuary. Some people want it silent, so others can worship. Others are greeting one another – literally a holy re—membering. We gather the members of the body together, and we remember to whom we belong, and our place in community as we hear the sacred story told again and again. And our sacred memory is restored to us.

The book is read from for the entire morning, but the people do not complain. The stories were

written in Hebrew, but by then the Israelites were speaking Aramaic, the language of the Babylonian & Persian Empires. So Ezra translated the stories into the people's language, and priests circulated among the people to "*give instruction in what was read and explain the meaning.*" The people weep. A sense of loss and shame overwhelmed them and they broke into tears. They had wandered so far from God and had forgotten so much about their faith that there was a huge gap now between the way God wanted them to live and the way they were living. Grief for their own failures. Grief upon hearing the old, old story that they had all but forgotten, but which named them and claimed them.  
*You are a people who mark and celebrate the holy days of Yahweh.*  
*You are a people who provide for others.*

When the Israelites heard the words from scripture, they discovered where *they* were in God's story. Like them, we remain a people of the book, of the story. Like them, we often forget or neglect our story. Sometimes when people who haven't been to church for a long time return, they spend a lot of time weeping. They don't know exactly why. Remembering their childhood? Weeping for lost years? Ezra said, "*Don't grieve, don't cry. This is a day of remembering who we are and who God is. Go home, prepare a feast, and share it with those who don't have anything. Eat the fat, drink the wine. Because this day is holy to God, and the joy of the Lord is your strength.*" They urge they people to celebrate. They have heard God's Word. Now they can put it into practice. This celebration doesn't simply mean "partying" but provided the opportunity for critical reflection in the light of the history they are claiming for themselves as a community.

A woman, who survived Auschwitz as a child, returns to the ground of her captivity and remembers the time when she and a fellow girl realized that day was Shabbat. The girls begin to sing to welcome the Sabbath and the song draws other children who join singing. A holy moment in time, amidst horror, reminds them of who they really are.

I am reminded of the pictures this week from Haiti of Christians gathered, amid such devastation, singing their prayers of hope for new life. Word read and ritual performed until our bones can sing as to who we are and what God is up to.

In a profound sense, Nehemiah and Jesus were about the same primary task. Both were seeking to call their people back to their spiritual origins. Christ calls his church out of its present day captivity, in all its myriad forms, to remember who we are. You are a people who have need of one another. You are a people that share the joy and suffering of one another and the world. You are a people gifted individually and arranged together by God for God's purposes. We remember this as we read the word, as we mark and celebrate holy days, as we provide care for others – in Haiti, in the Sudan, in our congregation, in our own families – bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and freedom to the oppressed.

The book of Nehemiah says, Do not yield to the spirit of despair. Do not default to gloom and doom. Instead, choose the radical option of genuine joy. There was a time to grieve the devastation of Jerusalem; but there also comes a time to move forward and to rejoice. That was then and this is today - a time to eat the fat and drink the sweet wine.

Nehemiah's account ends with the people celebrating and sharing gifts of food and wine, because their long season of amnesia was over. Their sacred memories were alive again. They could face the hard work that lay ahead assured of God's presence, God's love, God's guidance, and God's strength. And, so, we shout with Jesus, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me!*" **And we sing with Nehemiah and all the people of Israel, "The Joy of the Lord is my Strength!"**