

Feasting on the Word

Ezra 7:9-10 NRS⁹ On the first day of the first month the journey up from Babylon was begun, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the gracious hand of his God was upon him.

¹⁰ For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel.

2 Timothy 2:15 NRS Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

Romans 12:2 NRS Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Feasting on the Word

Last Sunday we gave some thought to what Jesus meant when he said that unless we eat his flesh and drink his blood, we have no life in us. (John 6:53 NRS) It became apparent that Jesus expects us to study his life and his teachings and then incorporate them into our own lives. We're to internalize Christ's message; we're to eat the lessons of his life and make them part of who we are.

There are two events in the Old Testament that have the greatest influence on the ancient Hebrew people and their relationship with God. The first is the saga of slavery when the Hebrews were in Egypt, their rescue by God, receiving the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, and the time of wandering as they made their way to the land of Canaan. The second major event is the defeat of these descendants of Abraham and their time spent in Babylonian captivity. It was a great blow to these people. They understood themselves to be God's chosen people, yet they were defeated, forced to leave the land that God had promised to them, and were carried off to captivity in Babylon. This took place a little less than 600 years before Christ. But, after the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians, things began to change for the Hebrew captives. Beginning with Cyrus the Great, the Persian rulers begin to let the captives return to Jerusalem and to their ancestral lands.

And so we come to Ezra, a person that we don't mention very often. Ezra was a descendant of Aaron and therefore of the priestly line. A Persian ruler, Artaxerxes by name, sent Ezra back to Jerusalem to refurbish the temple in Jerusalem, and to appoint judges and other local officials in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. From today's scripture, we learn that Ezra had goals beyond being a government official for the Persian Empire. "Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel." Ezra had his heart set on studying and learning God's will. Dare we ask if our hearts are set on that same goal of studying and learning God's will?

Learning God's law wasn't just an intellectual exercise; Ezra was determined to live what he learned. Beyond that, it wasn't a strictly personal and private endeavor; Ezra planned to teach what he learned and lived to his fellow Israelites. It's a logical sequence: learn it, live it, and share it. And Ezra planned to do all that while being a busy government official who had to keep Artaxerxes happy. This was twenty-four centuries before the idea of a forty hour work week. The king of Persia expected long hours and good results with no excuses. Ezra is a great example for us. Despite his work duties, he was determined to study and learn about God and God's will. He was going to find the time to do that. And he was going to put it into practice in his own life. Then he was going to share what he had learned. Again, what a great example for us! Perhaps you recall from last week how Paul urged the Ephesians to use time wisely. Ezra used his time wisely.

Today's epistle readings reinforce this message. Paul writes in the tenth chapter of Romans that "faith comes from what is heard." (Romans 10:17) But that assumes that one takes the time to hear, to read, to study. In the twelfth chapter of Romans, Paul goes on to speak of how we are to be transformed because our minds are changed; our minds are renewed by the understanding that comes from studying.

And finally, the second letter to Timothy says that we are to present ourselves to God as workers in the kingdom who have no need to be ashamed because we can correctly explain God's will to others.

So, how are we doing? Are we making time to listen, read, and study? That's the first step. It is also a never-ending journey. There's always more to learn, more to understand. You can't live what you don't know. And you can't share what isn't part of your own life. So it's essential that we find the time to learn and study and grow in our faith.

This is Rally Day. Each year at this time we celebrate the beginning of the church educational year. We have a Sunday morning class for young children. This class is important for several reasons. Children shouldn't feel like going to church is an adult activity that adults do and has nothing to do with them – like going with Mom when she's shopping or going to the hardware store with Dad. They shouldn't feel like they're here because the babysitter isn't available on Sunday morning. Instead, they need to feel like this is a place for them. We sing, "This is where children belong, part of the worshipping throng." Those aren't pleasant but empty phrases. Children are valuable and we need to be sure we act that way and that they understand that. Children will not, children cannot, learn the stories of the Bible and the basic ways that we are to live simply by sitting on the steps with someone for three or four minutes during children's time in the worship service. That's about the same amount of time as one commercial break on TV. It's important, but insufficient. If you want your children to know Jesus, if you want them to grow up with a good foundation in the faith and a positive attitude toward church, then it takes more time than the commercial break when they watch TV. A class devoted to them with lessons that are specifically designed for children is so valuable. For this reason, four people commit their time to prepare the lessons and teach this class.

The youth in this congregation are at a critical age. As they make the transition from being a child to becoming an adult they begin to step into the adult world with all of its complexity, its challenges, its pleasures, temptations, and responsibilities. They begin to sort out big issues of who am I, who do I want to be, what's right and what's wrong, what do I care about, and what do I believe? It's an exciting, vulnerable, painful, and pliable time of life. As they begin to think about the important questions, the big questions in life, we provide a class that helps them explore and think about these important issues as young Christians.

Then there are the adults. Most of us realize that we don't have all the answers yet. This fall, we are in the jaws of a political season. We talk about the separation of church and state, but how does that work? Some religious organizations seem to proclaim that there are only one or two issues that are important. TV ads, robo-calls on our phones, and mail in the mail box all try to get our attention until our eyes begin to glaze over. Political pundits yell at each other on TV, each accusing the other of incompetence, manipulation, evil motives, and lying. And on the internet many are pushing hard on the boundary of hate speech. What are Christians to do? How are we to be true to our faith in how we speak and treat each other during all of this turmoil? For the next six weeks, the Sunday morning adult class will explore how to live as Christians in this tense season.

After that, we'll take a close look at some women in the Bible who don't get as much attention as they deserve, but who are good examples for us to study. A lot of us may not have learned much more about the people in the Bible than the "Happy Meals" of Bible stories that were served up in Sunday School when we were little children. This series, titled *Uppity Women of the Bible* will take us beyond the level of chicken nuggets to turkey and dressing and gravy and on to hot wings and stuffed chicken breast. We'll all learn a lot and see these women as more than flannel board characters; they're real and complicated people.

As we get close to Advent, the adult class will have a special treat. Details will be released later.

Several people have remarked that the sermon series on King David revealed more than just a shepherd boy facing Goliath the giant. David became a much more interesting character and more relevant to their life today. In the coming months we'll explore together the core Bible stories and try to hear them in fresh and deeper ways. Quite frankly, these Bible stories are much more than we

remember from our past, so you might say that we will try to hear them again for the first time. In the process, we will learn how much their lives reach across the centuries to inform us how to live today.

Earlier I said that the whole Exodus saga was one of the most significant and formative stories in the scriptures. On Thursday nights, beginning on September 6 at 7:00, we will offer an in-depth Bible study on the Exodus. The foremost Old Testament scholar in the U.S. – Walter Brueggemann – will lead us through this six week study about countering Pharaoh – he will show the parallel issues in the New Testament. This is a wonderful chance to learn from an expert! There is more information in the bulletin insert today.

Children's classes, youth classes, and adult classes: There is a banquet of learning placed on the table, waiting for you to eat and grow stronger. The easiest thing to do is to procrastinate, telling yourself, maybe I'll have time next year. If you put off bringing your children to class, you'll wake up some day and wonder where the time went. They grow up so fast and time flies by before you know it. Besides, they need to see you learning – for them to understand the value in their learning. Paul urged us to use the time wisely. I urge you to crank up your curiosity. Come, drink the living waters that Jesus spoke of. Jesus said that his yoke is easy, but you do have to accept the yoke and make the effort to move ahead in your relationship with God. Come and join together in Feasting on the Word. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
The table is sagging with a bountiful feast.
Don't insult God by turning away from what God offers you.
Make wise use of your time.
Come. Eat and be filled. Grow stronger in the Lord.

Ezra 7:6-10 NRS Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses that the LORD the God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all that he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was upon him. ⁷ Some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants also went up to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. ⁸ They came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. ⁹ On the first day of the first month the journey up from Babylon was begun, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the gracious hand of his God was upon him. ¹⁰ For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel.

^{NRS} **Nehemiah 8:1** all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. ² Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³ He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁴ The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷ Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸ So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

2 Chronicles 17:7-9 NRS ⁷ In the third year of his reign he sent his officials, Ben-hail, Obadiah, Zechariah, Nethanel, and Micaiah, to teach in the cities of Judah. ⁸ With them were the Levites, Shemaiah, Nethaniah, Zebadiah, Asahel, Shemiramoth, Jehonathan, Adonijah, Tobijah, and Tob-adonijah; and with these Levites, the priests Elishama and Jehoram. ⁹ They taught in Judah, having the book of the law of the LORD with them; they went around through all the cities of Judah and taught among the people.

Romans 10:17 NRS So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.