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**Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10**; Luke 4:14-21

## THE HOLINESS OF NOW

Trauma, as we know, has deep and lasting effects on people. Trauma also affects the way we regard time, changing how we think about the past, the present, and the future. We will organize our thinking and date events based upon our specific trauma. We say things like, “Before my accident happened,” or “after my wife died.” Look at how we’ve so readily adopted the language and mentality of “pre-pandemic” and “post-pandemic.” When we experience adversity we conceive of time this way: there was life before the trauma and then some kind of altered, precarious present in the wake of the trauma. And often, often we are left very uncertain about what the future holds following the trauma.

The HBO series *Station Eleven*, based on the novel of the same title, tells the story of the survivors of a worldwide flu pandemic that kills most of the world’s people. The book was written in 2014, clearly before our current Covid-19 pandemic. And given that we are still grappling with our own ongoing pandemic, the topic of the series and the book are both pertinent as well as deeply unsettling. The story follows a group of survivors both during the initial outbreak of the pandemic and for the first twenty years following the pandemic. It is a radically altered world they live in with no electricity and no technology and no organized nations or governments. The characters in the story must wrestle with the effects of the trauma upon their lives, including the impact this has had on how they perceive the past, the present, and the future. One of the survivors creates a Museum of Civilization, a collection of items once considered ordinary in the pre-pandemic world—things like cell phones and household appliances—all which in the absence of electricity are now rendered obsolete. The creator of the museum

maintains that the past is everything. Other survivors, however, declare, “there is no before.” They completely toss the past out the window.

Central to the story is a troop of actors who travel around to the small settlements of survivors and perform various plays by Shakespeare. It is through the sharing of this art, and the reciting of the Shakespearean stories of human failure, sorrow, struggle, courage, and love that this group of actors endeavors to offer meaning and healing and hope in the face of the trauma everyone has experienced. One member of the troop, Kirsten, was a child when the pandemic killed her entire family. Over the next twenty years, as Kirsten wrestles with her personal tragedy, she clings to a book she carries with her everywhere—a fictional story about a spaceman who endured his own experience of trauma. In her efforts to deal with her sorrow, Kirsten reads and re-reads this book over and over again, focusing especially on its opening line: “I remember damage.”

I remember damage. I imagine you remember damage. Damage is inescapable. Damage is part of the human experience. Suffering and damage happen to us all.

“I remember damage.” I imagine this sentiment was probably upon the hearts and minds of those Jewish people assembled by Ezra and Nehemiah at the Water Gate. Those Jewish people had suffered great damage when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and much of the city, and then carried them off to live in exile in Babylon. But when Cyrus of Persia conquered the Babylonians and set the Jewish people free, they made their way back home again. We might imagine how joyful they were; how eager they were to go back to their beloved homeland. But when they arrived, reality set in. The city was in ruins. The temple was a pile of rubble. Family properties were obliterated. And as the people took in this sight, a

new trauma befell them—the trauma that came from realizing that life would not go back to the way it had been. Damage was everywhere.

The book of Nehemiah chronicles how the people slowly begin to re-construct the city. The reading today takes place in the midst of this re-construction, when the people gather at one of the city's gates to hear the scriptures read for the first time since coming back home. But instead of celebrating when they heard the scriptures, the people began to weep and mourn. They were overcome with emotion.

Nehemiah does not tell us why the people began to weep. Perhaps as they listened to the story of God told in their scriptures, perhaps the people realized how damaged they were. Maybe they could see the brokenness of the human condition, recognized their own sins, and faced the mistakes they had made which contributed to their society's downfall. Maybe their grief was over all this damage found within themselves.

Maybe they wept from the exhausting work of trying to rebuild their city and from realizing that despite all their efforts, the halcyon days of their kingdom were behind them, never to fully return. Maybe they understood in that moment that there was not to be a return to normal.

We have felt similar griefs in our lives, and especially in these distressing pandemic times. We as a society have made mistakes which we mourn. We grieve the past. Maybe you have had that horrible feeling in the pit of your stomach when you consider that the future may not ever include a return to “normal.”

Before the pandemic, Christianity in the United States and other western nations was already in terrible shape, but Covid-19 has dealt such a severe blow that some of us are realizing there may be no recovery for many of our churches. There may be no glorious return to the days

of Christendom—at least not as we knew it. We are living in the damage of the pandemic, in the damage arising from societal changes beyond our control, in the damage that climate change is bringing upon this magnificent planet, in the damage caused by human greed and shortsightedness. When confronted by all this damage, weeping does indeed seem like an appropriate response.

But Ezra the priest, and Nehemiah the governor, will not let grief have the final word. Instead of weeping and mourning, they tell the people: get up and wash the tears from your faces and to go set a table with good food and good wine, and share what you have with others. Why? Why are the people told to do this? Because, say Ezra and Nehemiah, because “this day is holy to the Lord your God.” *This* day is holy.

This day is holy. God is in *this* day. God is not waiting for the damage to be fixed before entering our lives. God is not waiting for prosperity or peace or health to enter our lives. God is not waiting for the pews to be filled, for the Sunday schools to be busting at the seams. God is not waiting for us to clean up our acts and fix our damage. God is in this day. This day is holy.

The gospel writer Luke gives us the story of Jesus’ very first sermon. Jesus is in the synagogue and he stands up before the people and reads from the prophet Isaiah. He says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And then Jesus rolls up the scroll and says to the people, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” *Today*. He doesn’t tell them that sometime soon God will fulfill this. He doesn’t wistfully recall bygone years when God did wondrous things for their ancestors. No, Jesus says *today!* *Today* the Spirit of God is here.

Are you crazy, Jesus? Have you seen the news recently? Are you aware of what exactly is going on in our world? But Jesus wasn't crazy. He understood what might be called the sacrament of the present moment. God is in this present moment. Jesus and his way of love and mercy and compassion, Jesus and his holy way reveal God's holy presence in the present moment.

A proper respect for the past and the future are essential for a healthy community. We honor the past through traditions and stories and maintaining buildings and ancient texts. We prepare for the future in all manner of ways, and look the future in hopes that we and our world might be better. But making the past or the future the center of our focus obscures the sacredness of the present moment. Dwelling excessively on the past can leave us depressed, believing our best days are behind us. Focusing excessively on the future can make us anxious for all that needs to be done or changed in order to ensure a good outcome. And as a result, today is lost. To honor today is to honor God. God is in this day. The active force of love is at work.

Damage does exist. We may carry damage within us. That is why getting help, finding therapy, dealing with the damage is so important. That is why we include a prayer of confession in our worship services—in order to face our damage. We do this because the damage we bear from the past can keep us from embracing the holiness of now, from living in this present moment in love, grace, joy, and gratitude.

There is good news for us damaged people. God is not waiting for the damage to be eliminated or fixed before joining us in today. God is with us this day, as we are, how we are. When we honor today, we can trust that God's goodness is not finite. It's some historic relic to be placed in a museum to be gazed at as we wistfully long for bygone days, nor is it just a

memory from long ago. No! God's goodness abounds *today*. When we honor today, our anxiety about the future is diminished because the God who is with us now will abide with us no matter what will come. And we are then freed to engage the holiness of the present moment. Appreciating the holiness of now calls us to live in God's realm of love and justice, mercy and compassion right now.

Today may not be as we want it to be. We may remember damage. We may be surrounded by damage. Today may not be all we want it to be. But it is holy because God is in it. And so are we.