

We Are Here
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-22
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We are here. This hardly seems like a noteworthy statement to make, certainly not the kind of gripping hook that a preacher ought to start a sermon with, but given the way the past month has unfolded, it actually does seem worthwhile to announce that We Are Here. This is the fourth weekend in a row that we have been threatened with snow or ice, with two of those threats coming to fruition. At this point, the weather report feels like some kind of meteorological practical joke, with forecasters gathering in back rooms wagering over how many weekends in a row they can tell us to expect winter weather before someone calls them on it.

Also, many of you might not know this, but last week we livestreamed our service for the first time. Throughout the virus, when we were unable to gather in person, folks labored tirelessly to put together a prerecorded service like the one that we aired on January 23rd. Last week, however, we worshiped here in this room and used the magic of the internet to make that same service available to people unable to get out of their homes or located hours away from here. So even though I'm claiming "We Are Here," perhaps that is not quite true. It may be that some of you hearing these words and turning your hearts toward worship are actually somewhere else.

The timing of our first livestream was somewhat inauspicious. The same day, the *New York Times* published an editorial titled "Why Churches Should Drop Their Online Services" by Tish Harrison Warren.¹ The article argued that online church is an inadequate substitute for the real thing, that there is true value in coming together in person and that churches continue to let go of that value even though the direst threat of the virus has passed. It was met with nearly universal acclaim as *Times'* readers responded with calls for their own churches to stop meeting online.

No, of course that wasn't the reaction. For one thing, nothing that anyone says in this day and age is met with universal acclaim. Instead, there was a huge wave of backlash against the article, with at least one response essentially claiming that Warren's views were anti-Jesus.² I'm still waiting for the next round of articles that defend Warren or, more accurately, that attack her attackers. Eventually this will descend into a clamor that actually has very little to do with the points that Warren made or with the idea of online worship at all. But before that happens, it's worth examining her points, especially since our congregation just started its livestream on the same day she dropped the article.

The main point that she made was this:

- 1) There is something essential to the act of worship that involves people seeking to honor God coming together, and
- 2) Trying to do that over the internet is less than ideal.

We can debate the second part a lot—I'll give you my opinion in a few minutes—but the first part isn't just something that Warren dreamed up. The first part is straight from the Bible itself.

¹ Warren, Tish Harrison. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/30/opinion/church-online-services-covid.html>

² Dingle, Shannon. "Quitting online church is abandoning the one for the 99." *National Catholic Reporter*. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/quitting-online-church-abandoning-one-99>

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We are moving quickly—too quickly—through the story of Nehemiah, time constrained by the weather that January brought. Nehemiah, living in exile, has heard that Jerusalem is in shambles; he receives permission to travel to the city and rebuild its walls. Various opponents attempt to impede his progress, but he clings to his faith and to his work ethic and gets the wall built in an astonishing 52 days. There is a lot that happens in those 52 days, and we are regrettably skipping over much of it...but what happens after the wall is built is also significant, and that is where we pick up the story today.

At this point in the story, not only are the walls of Jerusalem rebuilt but also are its homes inhabited. The town is showing signs of life again, meaning that the nation of Israel is also showing signs of life again, which is critical to the point of the wall going up in the first place. Rebuilding the wall provides many things for the Israelites, but among the most important is the sense of renewed unity and enthusiasm among them.

With this sense burgeoning within them, the Israelites gather to worship. They have been distressed, discouraged, attacked, and exhausted. More than anything, they have been scattered. Without the safety of the city walls, even the members who remained in Judah instead of being taken captive in Babylon have not really had the opportunity to come together. They especially have not been able to worship together. Now blessed with the ability to gather again, they choose to worship, and the account of their worship in these verses tells us an awful lot about how we worship centuries later.

The passage begins by telling us that “all the people” gathered together in “the square before the Water Gate.” There are a couple of things important about this sentence—important, but easy to overlook. The first is that the location is significant. The square by this gate was a place where everyone could gather, “even those who were ritually unclean.”³ The place is chosen primarily because it afforded *everyone* the opportunity to be there.

In fact, the very beginning of this verse (and therefore of this chapter) is the phrase “all the people.” In today’s reading, Nehemiah reiterates that either “all the people” or “both men and women” were present *eight times* in just *five verses*.⁴ It is an overwhelming point of emphasis. Nehemiah abandons any pretense of subtlety and just hammers over and over again that everyone—men and women, clean and unclean, beloved and despised, sinful and sacred, anyone who is willing to come to the square, anyone at all—every single person is present for the worship of God.

It is a point that comes through in the gospel reading this week as well. In this story, Jesus is leading worship in a synagogue in Nazareth. Again, the passage begins with the fact that Jesus “was praised by everyone”⁵ and concludes by saying “the eyes of *all in the synagogue* were fixed on him.”⁶ Luke bookends this story with the same language that Nehemiah uses in describing the worship of the Israelites, a language that suggests that the act of worship is

³ Lester, W. Carter. “Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10.” *Feasting On The Word, Year C, Volume I*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 266.

⁴ Davis, Valerie Bridgeman. “Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10.” *Feasting On The Word, Year C, Volume I*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 267.

⁵ Luke 4:15, NRSV.

⁶ Luke 5:20, NRSV, emphasis mine.

intended for anyone willing to show up, that barricades of piety or ritual cleanliness may have their place elsewhere but not when it comes to worship. Worship is for everyone.

When we begin our services in this room, we say some version of the sentence “all are welcome here.” These cannot be just words. The scripture tells us that this is a sacred and significant idea.

It is not a Western idea. The current mode of thinking in our culture is one that encourages individualism. We are a Do It Yourself people who want to handle pretty much everything on our own...and that means we believe we don't need anyone else to be present in order to achieve whatever we hope to achieve. But Nehemiah and Luke tell us that being a Christian is not something that we can do on our own.⁷ Worship is a communal activity, one that emphasizes the body of Christ and the corporate bond shared by all who seek him. When we worship, this is who we should be.

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These passages not only illustrate who we should be but also what we should do when we come together to worship, highlighting two commonalities that carry through to our worship today. The first is that the worship in Nehemiah and in Luke starts with and centers on the scripture itself.

A pastor I know tells a story of a church that began to complain that the worship services were too long.⁸ A concerned group—there's always a “concerned group” in stories like this—met with the pastor, and he asked them what parts of the service should be cut in order to get the time back down. No one wanted to cut the music. It felt blasphemous to cut the prayers. The sermon felt like the centerpiece of the service. Eventually, someone from the concerned group was willing to voice that they didn't really care for the reading of scripture in worship. The scripture readings, they said, were hard to follow, hard to get excited about, sometimes hard to hear. Maybe reading the scripture—the concerned group said—wasn't that important.

Well...first of all, if the worship service is too long, cutting the 90-second scripture reading isn't going to solve much. But second of all, the scriptures are extremely important to worship. Scripture is the core of the worship experiences in our texts today. In Luke, the reading of scripture is practically the entirety of worship—there is no music, no prayer, no sermon, just Jesus reading from the scroll of Isaiah and adding one sentence of his own. The same is true in Nehemiah—the scribe Ezra reads from the Torah, the book of the law, and while Nehemiah doesn't relate to us which verses are read, it is clear that the scripture itself is the foundation of their worship.

When churches reflect on their worship experience, typically the conversation is about style or length or the roles that different people will fill or how to make the service more enticing to visitors or putting the service online. Those are the things we churches talk about in 2022, and while they're not necessarily bad...they're not scripture. The Bible itself must lay at the heart of our approach to God, or our approach to God will set off down the wrong path on its very first step, and those other questions won't end up mattering at all.

⁷ Lester 268.

⁸ I have been reminded, on occasion, that rarely does one complain that the service is too short.

And what the scriptures tell us about worship—what these scriptures this morning tell us about worship, aside from the fact that worship should be welcoming to all who seek it and that worship should be built on the scriptures themselves—is that we who come to worship should do so with a heart full of confessional wonder and spectacular awe.

Again, this marveling of worshipers happens in both the Old and New Testament readings. In Nehemiah, the Israelites are rapt with attention, gripped by the fact that Ezra is about to read to them. They shout out “Amen” and then fall prostrate to the ground. Later, they will be moved to tears at the power of the words that they hear. Likewise, in Luke, we’re told that the crowd that gathered was fixated on Jesus as he read from Isaiah and that when he concluded, they were amazed and inspired.

This is a crowd gathered for a Springsteen concert right as the lights go low; this is the parents of a newborn about to hold their child for the first time; this is a teen coming home from her first date and an old man looking at scrapbooks and warmly reflecting on his life; this is fireworks and shooting stars and a sunset over water, all of those things wrapped into one moment.

Now...I know that this isn’t how we react to the scripture, no matter how well Carlisle read it today. But it is, at least occasionally, how we react to well-done worship. Over even just the six months I’ve been here, I can think of multiple times when a solo has merited an “Amen” or a prayer has required a moment of silence or a spoken reflection has drawn a tear. Moments like these come when we enter the room with a humble, open mindset and when we allow ourselves to be influenced by others who are also approaching God. When we do this as a gathered people, as a body of believers, then it opens us to the fascinating, overpowering awesomeness of a mysterious God.⁹

And when that happens, we are changed. As one of my commentaries put it:

When we gather together as God’s people, when we are conscious of coming into the presence of the living and holy God, when we center our worship on God’s Word, when we offer all of ourselves to God, we cannot help but be changed over time. We gather to give glory to God and to have God make a difference in us so that we can make a difference in God’s world.¹⁰

The rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem is not really about the wall at all. It is about the rebuilding, the transformation of God’s people so that they can make a difference in God’s world.

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I have been transformed, occasionally, while watching a screen. That was my experience when I first watched *Field Of Dreams* and *Casablanca*, and when I looked at an ultrasound of my future daughter, and maybe one or two other times in my life. It happens. But it doesn’t happen often. The transformative, awe-striking, uniting power of worship is unlikely to happen through a screen...it could happen, of course, but not often.

It is far more likely to happen when we are gathered in one place, together, open to each other and to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is what happens in the stories of our scripture. This is what happens in our lives today.

⁹ Winn, Albert Curry, qtd. by Lester 268.

¹⁰ Lester 270.

This is the point, I think, that Tish Warren was trying to make in her article. Especially in a culture where people are driven to isolate and DIY, to separate and square off instead of coming together in the public square, we the Church shouldn't be making it okay to stay walled off and to settle for the nontransformative experience that most online worship is. I think she's right about this, right about the fact that gathering is critical to worship and that gathering online is a less than ideal way to do this.

I do love the fact that we have people who experienced last week's worship service from other cities, at times other than 11:00, or from their own homes when they were not able to be here in person. It was a remarkable service, crafted by several different voices who shared from their own lives with a kind of vulnerability that would have made Nehemiah proud. But I've watched the service, and I'm glad that I was in the room. Being here last week was special.

When we are unable to gather—when any of us is unable to gather—it is good that we have options that still allow us to ponder the word of God and to offer praise. Worship should be for everyone. But when we are able to gather—when any of us is able to gather—we should do so. This is how the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, how the nation of Israel was reshaped, and how the body of Christ will reform and be re-formed in the world we live in now.