

Nehemiah 8 1-3; 5-6; 8-10

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. 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. 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 ... 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. 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 worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground... So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of our LORD is your strength."

Note for Preachers:

If the greatest of the God-given institutions is the Sabbath rest (Genesis 2.2), the most adequate reflection and gift of Israel to the whole of humanity is the way to respond to Torah, the matrix of all creation, reflecting the mind of God. At a time of reformation and rebuilding in Israel, Ezra gathers the people in one place and reads and explains the Law of Moses. This is the incipient synagogue, prototype also of the Christian congregation. The people hear the Word clearly and respond with understanding. God moves towards us in his one eternal Covenant and we reply by hallowing his name in specific ways; caring for other humans. Our rejoicing in the Torah (God's creative Word) is the foundation for the wellbeing, and opposition to the destruction, of any part of the human race.