

**SERMON - UNIVERSITY CHAPEL SUNDAY, JAN. 24, 2016.
(3RD Sunday after Epiphany)**

Topic: *God's Presence through the revelation of the birth of Jesus Christ, enables us to become Good Stewards.*

Text: Nehemiah 1: 1-10

Introduction

Today is the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany. As God reveals God's self to us in Christ, we reveal ourselves to God through our faith, our prayer, our worship, our good works, our fellowship and our Stewardship. In doing so, we reveal not only who we are but WHOSE we are.

Let us pray:

Dear God of creation, as we worship you this day, we bring a part of ourselves into the presence of the holy. We come with humble hearts seeking your guidance and wisdom. We know that we sin. We know that you accept us as we are, sinful and not whole. Take away the negative aspects of our nature and fill us with your Spirit to be proper stewards of your world.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. Amen.

Our text is from Nehemiah 8: reading verses 9-10.

⁹When the people heard what the Law required, they were so moved that they began to cry. So Nehemiah, who was the governor; Ezra, the priest and scholar of the Law; and the Levites who were explaining the Law told all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God, so you are not to mourn or cry. ¹⁰Now go home and have a feast. Share your food and wine with those who haven't enough. Today is holy to our Lord, so don't be sad. **The joy that the LORD gives you will make you strong.**"

The story of Nehemiah takes place after the exile in Babylon in the year 475 BC. The people are poor and demoralized and frightened, having returned from slavery to face a totally ruined land and a destroyed city.

Nehemiah is sent to be the Governor of Israel by the king to help the people rebuild the land. Ezra, the priest, appears to help the people rediscover the worship of the one true God.

One day, just after the walls of the city have been rebuilt, everyone is gathered in the square before the Water Gate and the Torah is read.

Ezra reads the law as requested by the people and priests circulate in the crowd during the six long hours he reads and interprets the law and explains its meaning; and the people mourn as they listen. They grieve for themselves and for their nation because they realize that the nation had failed to remember the Word of God, heard so long ago, and so had been brought to ruin.

(Where in God's world today would we find the people of the nation gathered to listen to God's word expounded?) Quite likely at a large stadium to watch a well loved game, or to listen to some popular pop singer; but very unlikely to listen to the Word of God read and explained for six hours!

Nehemiah and Ezra, and all the priests who have been teaching the people, see this mourning and grief as the people hear and understand the Word of God, and they say to the people: "Do not mourn or weep. This day is sacred to our Lord. **Do not grieve for the Joy of the Lord is your strength.**

At the end of the reading - Nehemiah sends the people away to their homes to enjoy good food and sweet drink, and to share their tables with those who have nothing with which to celebrate. This is a great story with a great message.

Whenever the people of God gather in community, as we are doing now, something remarkable happens. Even when the raw power of emotion evokes something from us, **God redeems that and every moment by God's presence and grace.**

The benediction of our worship ought always to challenge us to move beyond our volatile emotions to the place of celebrating the consistency of God's joy in our lives – so says Danny West the commentator of this passage

Let us look at the relationship between Epiphany and Stewardship. We have already recognized that all that we have - even life itself, is a gift from God, given in trust. As stewards we aim to take care of our gifts, and use them in ways consistent with God's purposes. Stewardship is not primarily about money, although money is not exempted.

Everything we have is part of the equation - our bodies and minds, our relationships, our time and talents, and as we recognized last week, the environment.

Let us examine what it means to be a good steward. **The first important notion of stewardship** is that we recognize the fact that we are blessed. We recognize also the many things that come to us freely. We call this grace - God's generous giving to us, both material and spiritual.

As one Catechism states: Grace is the undeserved love of God to all humankind.

The second important notion is to use wisely what we have received as a gift, not just for ourselves but for others around us and for those who come after us.

As we discussed last week it is good to be environmentally conscious. In doing so, we recognize that we did not make the earth, but that it is entrusted to us to be used wisely and that we are called to protect it for those who come after us.

But it is just as important to be conscious of every aspect of our lives in which we have been blessed. We have to be good stewards of all things earthly: materially, and spiritually.

This 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany we have the mystery of the Epiphany to help us focus. As it was for the Magi, revelation and journey are a part of our lives as well. We speak metaphorically of life as a journey. We “travel” through various episodes and places in our lives. Sometimes the road is good and the going pleasant, but sometimes it is uphill and difficult. No matter which it might be we have to keep going. No one can walk the road of our lives for us. The Magi had to make the journey to see the source of their interest. God revealed and they had to spring into action. And they did not know what it would be as they set out.

(Migrants/Refugees of past centuries as well as ours know what this journeying means. What a dread situation for those migrants from Syria and Iraq! As God’s compassionate stewards; let’s give them a thought and pray for them).

God invites us his faithful stewards to pray for the oppressors of the nations from which these persons come. Pray that they will exercise compassion, and brotherly and sisterly love.

The call of God requires a response. A full and generous response. God reveals but we must make the effort to follow up. It is no one else’s job to make us good stewards or to make good from what we have been given, it is our own.

The Magi had to respond. It was insufficient for them just to notice the star and wonder at its significance, allowing someone else to do the investigation. They took it as their responsibility to make the long hazardous journey to find out.

We can see then that as it was for the Magi, so it is for us. We must step up to meet our spiritual and stewardship obligations. It is not an option.

We must examine ourselves to see whether our attendance at church services, our involvement, our knowledge of our faith and our witnessing to it, our generosity as a whole is where it needs to be. We must make a journey similar to the wise men's.

Let's look at what they did and let's look at what we can do. Let us take time to focus on how we can be better stewards of our time, our talent and our treasure.

Time – The Magi had to make the trip and it was not easy. They set aside whatever they were doing to find out the source of what they saw. The same is true for us. In a busy world, God often gets left out or marginalized. It is hard to make the time for daily reflection and prayer, for Sunday worship and for activities that both cultivate our faith and nurture our spiritual lives. Yet we know that like the Magi did, the reward is worth the effort.

Talent – The Magi had the wisdom and ability to discern the stars of the sky and to know seasons and happenings from what they saw. God has given immeasurable talents to us.

The first step we must make is to recognize that these are gifts from God. We sharpen and develop the gifts to make good come from them, but the talent, the drive, the breath and energy of what we do is not from us. So first we must recognize and be thankful for God's abundant blessings of talent. But then, like the journey from the revelation, we must move generously with what we have been given.

Let me ask you to think about how much of your talent and energy goes to things outside yourself and your family – outside the things that you either have to do or want to do – for the betterment of someone else. Something to think about isn't it!

Treasure – The Magi gave gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. Do you ever wonder what Mary thought of those gifts? What are simple,

poor people going to do with incense? They obviously came prepared for meeting someone important.

The very Son of God is important. His work on earth in the Church is important. When we give, we never lack.

Part of our human nature is to keep to ourselves so as to never have to risk and then never have to lose. But if we do that, although we may not lose, it is also assured that we will not gain!

The Magi left, not knowing where they were going! And yet they found what they were looking for. Why? God led them!

By definition, God cannot lead if we will not move. God is suggesting, beckoning, calling, but until we take a step, God is not leading. If the Magi had been unconvinced about the revelation of God that they saw, they would have remained safe and secure, but they would have remained without Christ.

If we sit unwilling to risk, to learn, to grow and to give, then the same is true. Stewardship requires that we do two things – realize what God is revealing and respond to what God wants us to do.

Paul's imprisonment did not prevent him from using the opportunity to preach the good news to the prison guards.

We too as God's stewards must use every opportunity to live out the gospel wherever we are placed.

God's Presence with us.

In Psalm 19, David shows that God has spoken to us through God's revelation of God's world. The Psalm begins with "The heavens declare the glory of God" and concludes with verse 6, concerning the revelation of Creator God in the midst of creation. The second part begins in verse 7 and runs through verse 11 which commends God's law. The final verses reflect the response of the person of faith in God's commands.

In verse 7, the poetry and focus of the psalm begin to change. The focus shifts to the “law of the Lord”. The psalmist expresses great joy at being part of a people whom God has blessed with the law and its promises. While the transition seems abrupt, the psalmist understands that just as the sun encompasses all the earth with its radiance and heat, so nothing and no one can hide from God’s word through the law, which enlightens all.

As noted by the Psalmist, God’s commands revive the soul, bring wisdom, rejoice the heart, and enlighten the eyes. These decrees, precepts, commandments, ordinances not only bring us joy, but our keeping them protects us from our transgressions and ourselves. We glimpse the good life that God has in store if we follow God’s commands. The psalmist also issues a warning about the danger of turning our backs to those commands. The laws of the Lord are perfect and have stood the test of time.

The passage invites us to look at our lives and recognize the possibilities of joy more than judgment, healing more than condemnation, creativity more than legalism. The commands of God intend to help us lead good lives, orderly lives, and joy-filled lives. The psalm closes with the prayer that many preachers use to open their sermons – including the one I used today – “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer”. May it be so.

Let God’s creation humble you in God’s presence. The Bible is clear that the sinful tendency of human beings is to proudly exalt ourselves to think that we are like God. But the clear truth is that we are not like God. God alone is the almighty creator.

Who of us here or anywhere else can try speaking anything into existence? (I saw on the BBC programme Horizon on Friday night that scientists, using modern technology are working at preventing human beings from dying.) Be that as it may, compared to God we are just a mere breath. This means that we cannot use God for our own ends. God

doesn't exist to make us happy as we pursue our own selfish goals. God is the sovereign of the universe, who alone is great. We need to humble ourselves and submit to our awesome Creator.

We are challenged this day and onwards to heed God's call as extended to us by God's Son Jesus and follow God all the way

The hymn writer states:

Jesus calls us! By your mercies, Saviour, may we hear your call. Give our hearts to your obedience, Serve and love you best of all.

Let us pray: God of Life, help us to follow your commands and turn from our transgressions. Grant us the wisdom and strength to be your caretakers in the world. You give us the courage to change. You give us the power to turn the smallest seed into the greatest tree. We can change because you are with us, leading our path and guiding our daily lives. Bless us and keep us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.