

“Everyone Loves a Parade”

Nehemiah 12:27-47

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • December 10, 2017

Growing up in South Louisiana, parades were kind of a big deal. While most places have celebrations that include a parade, Mardi Gras is a season of parades. I'm not just talking about New Orleans, which of course has the most parades with over 60 each year! But in other places in South Louisiana it's such a big deal that there's no school for several days. Parades are held for all kinds of reasons. Maybe one of the best kinds of parades is a victory parade. For example, just a couple of months ago there was a huge parade in Houston after the Astros won the World Series for the first time ever.

Here in Nehemiah 12 we find the Israelites holding a parade. This time it's part of their dedication of the completed walls of Jerusalem. This is really the climax of the entire story of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. All of the pieces of Nehemiah's plan have come together. As we saw in chapter 6, the wall was completed in record time – only 52 days – followed by a great spiritual revival sparked by reading God's Word. As they studied the Scriptures they learned that they were supposed to keep the harvest festival, the Festival of Booths, and so they did. They followed that festival with a time of corporate repentance and a renewal of their commitment to God's covenant. This included a renewed commitment in writing to keep the Sabbath and other laws, and to give generously for the operation of the Temple.

Nehemiah has led the people to rebuild not only their city but also their faith. He has accomplished everything he set out to do and so it's time to celebrate with a service of dedication. The first step is to bring in the Levites from the little villages surrounding Jerusalem. The Levites were one of the twelve tribes of Israel, descended from Levi. God had set them apart to serve the Tabernacle and later the Temple, and so they were the only tribe that didn't inherit land. They depended on the tithes from the other tribes.

Moses and Aaron were from the tribe of Levi and God chose Aaron and his descendants to be the priests. So all priests were Levites but

not all Levites were priests. The rest had other jobs to do in the Temple, many of them as musicians, which is one of the things we find them doing here for the dedication of the wall.

The celebration begins with the Priests and the Levites purifying themselves, purifying the walls and gates of the city, and purifying the people. This certainly would have been the ritual purification described in the Torah and it would have included ritual washing and particular sacrifices. They recognized that sin is what separates them and us from God and it must be dealt with. Of course the only real remedy for the problem of our sin is the blood of Christ. The Old Testament Law points us to Jesus. That's why Paul says in Romans that the Law makes us aware of the depth of our sin and need for a savior who does not sin.

Nehemiah brings the leaders of Israel up onto the wall and assembles two great choirs, including instruments. He sends half of the leaders and one of the choirs marching south around the top of the wall, led by Ezra the Priest, and singing loudly as they go. The other half goes to the north doing the same thing, with Nehemiah following them. Both groups march half way around the city and meet back up at the Temple where the priests offer sacrifices and there's a huge worship service to celebrate. It seems to me that we can learn a lot from this story about our own worship. There are three things the Israelites do that we should do as well – they *pause*, they *prepare*, and they *participate*.

So first of all they *pause* to worship. All of the people involved were busy with other work but they paused to come together for the dedication. Today we live busy, crowded lives. Lots of people these days, people who consider themselves Christians, have decided that they are too busy to attend worship in a church. But God instructs us to keep the Sabbath, one day a week when we are to pause from our daily routine and busyness. One day a week when we are to pause and focus on God. The Bible is pretty clear that the best way for you to focus on

God is to do it together with His people and to make it a regular part of the rhythm of your life.

The second thing we learn from this passage is that the people *prepared* for worship. The priests and Levites prepared by purifying themselves. This obviously involved preparing their bodies through the rituals, but it also prepared their hearts to serve God. As they went through the ritual it focused their mind on God, preparing them to serve.

Let me ask you, what did you do to prepare for worship today? I suspect most of us don't prepare. We come each week without really reflecting on why we come to worship or what it means to worship a holy God. Many of us find we're running late and are lucky to get here at all. If you're trying to get here with all of your kids dressed you know how exhausting it can be. Sometimes it's everything you can do just to make it here. Trust me I understand. But if you can find a way to prepare your heart and mind to come into the presence of God, to worship the creator of the universe who wants to have a personal relationship with you, I think you will find your worship experience will be much more meaningful. It begins with quieting your mind and directing your thoughts to Jesus. Maybe try to come 10 minutes early and sit here in the sanctuary. Better yet, come to one of the Sunday morning Bible studies where you can spend some time praying and studying God's word with others.

Finally, we see that the Israelites *participate* in worship. Presbyterian pastor Mark Roberts comments, "The people of Israel did not dedicate the wall by sitting and listening. They participated." It wasn't just the choirs who sang. They were merely *leading* the singing by the entire congregation. Verse 43 says, "they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away." They sang so loud that they could be heard for miles around. They sang loudly because they were joyfully praising God.

We need to come to worship with the same attitude. We all need to come to participate. Worship is not something we observe. We don't come and form an audience to watch a performance up on the stage. Worship is something we do. Sometimes people will say something like, "I didn't really get anything out of worship today." They might go so far as to mention the music or the preaching or the person distracting them. My response would be, "you're doing it wrong." You don't worship primarily for what you get out of it. You could say worship is a performance, but *you* are the performers and God is the audience. Those of us who are helping lead worship are here to prompt you in your worship.

I want to conclude by briefly mentioning the ways you participate in worship. First of all, singing is a big part of it. The choir, the organ, the piano, guitars, all have one purpose and that's to help lead the singing. The whole purpose of the music program of the church is to lead the congregation in singing. But singing is not the only way you participate. Our whole service is designed for everyone to participate. The call to worship at the beginning, which is usually responsive, is God calling you to worship Him. We respond by singing. We confess our sins in prayer and then we affirm the basics of what we believe, usually with the Apostles' Creed. The offering is another way we participate in worship. Even the reading and preaching of the Word is meant for you to engage your brain by active listening as the Holy Spirit helps you apply the Scriptures to your life. Many people find it helpful to take notes. And of course true worship should change you. You should leave with a renewed commitment to Jesus. That's my prayer for you, that each Sunday you would experience Christ in worship in such a way that you can't wait to come back again!

Amen.