

**Ode to Joy**  
Epiphany 3  
January 23, 2022

Nehemiah 8: 1-2, 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. <sup>2</sup>Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding.*

*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. <sup>10</sup>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 the LORD is your strength.”*

*Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee,  
God of glory, Lord of love;  
Hearts unfold like flow'rs before Thee,  
Op'ning to the sun above.  
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness;  
Drive the dark of doubt away;  
Giver of immortal gladness,  
Fill us with the light of day!*

We love this song –

*music by Beethoven, called “Ode to Joy” and words by Henry Van Dyke, It’s a balm to the soul to sing it: Lately, I’ve been discouraged by sin and the sadness it brings. By the way we bicker with each other that we are a world without a rudder, we cannot find a path. A set of laws, guidelines to govern ourselves. Even as a nation that will keep us in harmony and mercy and compassion. That is equitable and just.*

Nehemiah was wondering this too, about Jerusalem he was only the cupbearer to the king. But he saw the walls of the temple falling down. The people

falling apart and was called to restore it. To restore the people's understanding of who they are. So he goes to Jerusalem Ezra the priest and Nehemiah; share the rules of life which God shared with Moses. Now with the people of the Jerusalem, they read them aloud and men and women gather. And they understand it, understand what it means that it is for them, each of them. All of them, these guidelines, these rules for living well are not easy. And so they weep, how shall they live this way? They have lived without a rudder for so long! But Nehemiah says to them, *"This day is holy to the Lord. Do not weep."* He encourages them to trust themselves and God's precepts As we find in Psalm 19:

*The guidelines of God are perfect and refresh our souls  
The guidance of God is trustworthy and make wise the simple  
The ways of God are right, bringing joy to the heart,  
The ways of God are radiant, giving light to the eyes.  
The wonders of God are forever  
And the teachings of the Lord are our foundation*

The people had a way, a path to walk, a way that required them to give of themselves. To deny other ways, eat what you have, share with those who have none. For this will give God joy and the joy of the Lord is your strength. He knew that they had a way, a path to walk. A way that required them us to deny themselves other ways. But that was then, this is now. I wonder, are we too far gone? Is the world, are the people even of this land truly interested in a rudder, in guidelines, laws for living?

There is a writer in Ireland, named Paul Kingsworth who grew up without the guidelines of a faith. Any faith. When he was a boy he was drawn to churches but scribbled silly threats in the church guest books, mocking the simpletons who believed. He sought out causes, including the care of the earth and peoples. But there was something missing. He realized that the reason that human beings will trod on any land, pollute every water, cut down every tree harm anyone in the way. Because there is no holy anchor, no right path, that guides them, to save the earth and themselves and others. Something calling him not only to the cathedrals but to a path. A well-worn road that he would have to walk with others. Called Christian, paths that lead him away from some

things and toward that which would anchor him in the eternal, in love, love of the divine, love of neighbor, and his deepest truest self.

Our friend, Dayquan is now 3 and a half years in jail still awaiting trial. Locked 23 hours a day in a 6 foot by 9-foot cell. I visited him this week, each time I ask him what he is learning. And within the confines of that place, he is learning a lot, he says. Like the beauty of nature. He has a window that looks out into the cement structure of the next building, only a sliver of sky can be seen.

And this week, within that small space of sky, that limited view, framed by cement walls for the first time in more than 3 years, he saw a bird. *“They are so beautiful,”* he said. He is learning about love, he says. He loves his family, cherishes them as he never did before. But he cares too for his neighbor. The man who is in the next cell, with whom he talks day and night. He has learned to like his guards. They are good people, he says. He has a Bible, and he prays all the time, and he says, *“God is here with me, teaching me patience.*

Patience, love of neighbor, and family and self. Surely that makes the Lord glad and that joy of the Lord has become Dayquan’s strength.

On Friday, Cathy Davis brought Cindy – a long-time unhoused person - to our Warming Station in Room 8. And the Warming Station team was there to receive her with love and food and to sing happy birthday and to share a cake. And to share a warm jacket and a little help to keep her indoors over the weekend. And joy filled she who received and those who offered.

And, Nehemiah would say, surely God’s own spirit and all in that circle felt strengthened by that joy. *“Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”* Caring for one another as ourselves. Enjoying the glimpse of sky. The bit of earth and all it provides. Walking the way that has been shown us. Living according to the precepts of love, mercy, justice. Compassion, servanthood, this brings joy to the Lord and that is our strength.

*Thou art giving and forgiving,  
Ever blessing, ever blest,  
Wellspring of the joy of living,  
Ocean depth of happy rest!*

*Thou our Father, Christ our Brother,  
All who live in love are Thine;  
Teach us how to love each other,  
Lift us to the joy divine.*

Amen.