

*Then [Ezra] said to [the people of Israel], "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."*

[Nehemiah 8:10 NRSV]

Dear siblings in Christ of the Northeastern Ohio Synod,

Only once in our Lectionary do we read from the book of Nehemiah. But the circumstance of the past month have driven me to look for some guidance in that seldom read, but abundantly rich book of Scripture.

These last several weeks have been a virtual roller coaster ride. The Coronavirus, or COVID-19, as it is scientifically known, has sent our world spinning in unpredictable directions.

The most unexpected consequence of this pandemic has been the suspension of in-person public worship. Never in our lifetime could we have expected not to be able to worship in the same building at the same time.

The virus, and its subsequent quarantine, has forced us to find new ways of being church. We have been compelled to discover creative ways to meet.

We thank God for the gift of technology. But without the physical contact, the ability to touch, to shake hands, to kiss anyone else, we miss a great deal of what makes for the enjoyment of meeting together, of fellowship.

It seems almost fitting that the world has come under the global grip of this pandemic during Lent, when we traditionally practice the Lenten

discipline of fasting. However, fasting from worship is not what any of us had in mind.

During the Lenten season, we often read about the Israelites 40-year journey in the wilderness. What we're experiencing makes that image very real.

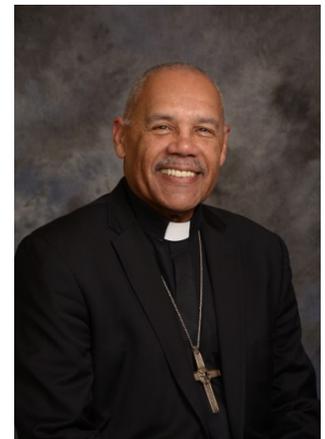
But it also calls to mind the experience of exile, which is where Nehemiah offers us a measure of comfort in what may lie ahead.

By way of background, at one time, God had given the people of Israel everything, including freedom from slavery in Egypt and a land they could call their own. God made them special – God's chosen people.

But because of their disobedience, the people of Israel squandered their prosperity and brought on their own destruction. Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, and the people of Israel were exiled.

And *then* they remembered what it felt like to be the chosen people of God. *Then* they remembered what it felt like to be so special. *Then, and only then*, in the midst of tremendous agony and suffering, could they know what it felt like to be isolated from God.

Fortunately for the children of Israel, God did not sit idly by and let them suffer. God remembered them. And most importantly, they would remember God. God worked in their salvation history, forging a remnant of people, like Ezra and Nehemiah, who were



capable of understanding what had happened to them. It was through Ezra and Nehemiah that God reminded the people of Israel of God's promises, of God's boundless mercy and steadfast love.

After settling back in Jerusalem, with their city rebuilt, their temple restored, the people once again hear the Word of God and are reminded of the good old days. Jerusalem would not be the same Jerusalem of old, but their God is.

The resettlement of Jerusalem was a celebration! The joy of being reminded that they had never lost their special status; that, in spite of their sinfulness, they were always in the grip of God's grace.

COVID-19 has brought us face to face with the realization of how much worship means to us. As surely as the pandemic is a source of grief, it also reveals to us the source of our hope: The God who keeps promises.

These days are a time of change brought about through an encounter with the word of God. The change may involve attitude – rejoicing and praising God, in all places, not just in our church building. The change may involve financial priorities – giving rather than getting; supporting our congregation in more concrete ways. The change may involve finding comfort and hope in the midst of despair and death.

The word of God comes to us in many forms, if only we have eyes to see, ears to hear, and hands to feel.

Hearing the word of God is a moving experience. If it hasn't been that for you before, it may have you rethinking it now

God's word should move us in such a way that we cannot remain the same. We cannot

remain rooted in the same place, in an exclusive spiritual pigeonhole.

*"This day is holy to the Lord your God," Ezra says. "Do not mourn or weep."*

Our encounter with the word launches us into the world, to work together with this God for the establishment of God's kingdom. It This is a kingdom of justice and peace, of righteousness, compassion, caring and sharing. We become agents of transformation, transfiguration and radical change.

Like the people of Israel, we look forward to the future rather than hopelessly to the past. We look forward to a time when we can celebrate once again in person, with food and drink at the table that the Lord has prepared for us, and then joyfully go out and share this celebration with others.

As of now, we don't know when that time will be. But the future belongs to God, and because of that, we go forward in faith.

Peace and blessings,



+Bishop Abraham D. Allende