

**"Spirited Voice?"**  
**(Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10)**  
**January 23, 2022**

"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man." (Gen 2:23a) This is the voice of Adam, the first man created from dirt, spoken when God introduced Eve to him, with whom he believed a partnership would work. He announced to other creatures that she was his dream partner. He appeared to be in high spirits when he sang that love song. And then he put her in a position that was so high that they crossed together the boundary God set for them.

The creation story captured the mystery of the emergence of human knowledge and wisdom, and the dilemma came with it. Should humans, exemplified by Adam and Eve, follow the given instructions, or be more adaptive, innovative, creative, be curious, and keep seeking breakthroughs? Adam and Eve chose the latter. The same story repeated itself in human history, in Israelite history. The Israelites were in slavery in Egypt, treated like dirt by the Egyptians. God used Moses to bring them hope. They took the chance, followed Moses into the wilderness, and kept looking for advancement. They tried but couldn't get along with other people they met on their way. They pressed Moses to give them water, food, and safety. And Moses gave them what they wanted, plus the Ten Commandments and some rules, so that they could manage their living together as a harmonious group. Despite some hiccups, they settled in Palestine and founded a kingdom. Saul united the tribes at the north and the south, David strengthened their relationship, and Solomon made it stronger through making treaties with the neighboring nations. They behaved like Adam and Eve, followed

some of God's instructions, and disobeyed some. They made their way through the strong military, political, and cultural powers in the neighborhood of the Promised Land and established their own, which didn't last long.

Adam and Eve had to leave the garden of Eden while the Israelites were to leave the Promised Land. After the monarchical kingdom split into two, Assyria destroyed the northern one in 721 BC. The southern one lasted longer, but finally, Babylon finished it about 130 years later, in 587 BC. Most royal members, government officials, and influential people were exiled and were treated like dirt. Fifty years later, in 539 BC, the Persian Empire defeated the Babylonians. The new king allowed the peoples in exile to return to their own countries. More than 42,000 Jews returned. They managed to rebuild the city wall of Jerusalem and the temple. The story we read this morning described the situation in Jerusalem, about a century after their return. They were still struggling with the question of whether they should follow God's instructions strictly or allow themselves to slip a little bit away from them. They gathered together at the Water Gate and listened to Ezra, who read from a book that was new to them. The book of Torah was written in the language their ancestors used, and the only way they could understand its content was to have it translated into Aramaic through the help of the Levites. The message was that God had given them clear instructions on living a righteous life, but their ancestors didn't follow. Ezra announced that the chance to change their predicament had arrived again. If they chose to follow God's instructions, they would be prosperous and live a new life. Were they listening attentively? Yes, they were. "The ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law." And they answered with their hands lifted, "Amen, Amen."

"Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared." Were these the only things Ezra told them to do? Of course not. Ezra stressed the importance of holiness among them as the key to keeping their status as the people of God. He put all the blames on intermarriage and the mixing of cultures. So, does the Torah say anything about this? Yes, it does. "When the Lord your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out ... seven nations larger and stronger than you ... you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them ... for they will turn your children ... to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God ... his people, his treasured possession." (Deut 7:1-6) Wasn't it the result of reflections, explaining why their kingdoms were demolished, why the people were exiled? As a matter of fact, their ancestors were not pure in everything before the destruction of their kingdoms and temples.

"Amen. Amen." Hear the sound of the people who responded to the reading of the Torah. They said it with their hands raised. They must be in high spirits. The reason and solution Ezra offered sounded logical too, but was it moved by God's Spirit? The people wanted to remove themselves from the catastrophe that had happened before. Therefore, they decided to follow the Torah strictly even though it was harsh. They agreed to expulse foreign wives. Would their actions make them holy? Were they racist and their actions irrelevant?

Abraham married his half-sister Sarah which was explicitly banned in the Book of Torah. (Lev 18:9) Abraham could not keep his son Ishmael in the family.

Was it simply because Hagar was an Egyptian slave, a handmaiden of Sarah? Remember, God chose Abraham not because he was a perfect and flawless person. Besides, he almost sacrificed his son, which was later explicitly forbidden in the Jewish tradition. If we believe the faith of Moses must be pure, we would be surprised to know that his father-in-law was a Midianite priest from whom Moses sought advice. (Ex 18:17-24) "Whoever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites ... I will offer it up for a burnt offering." (Judges 11:31) Was Jephthah, one of the judges, being criticized for sacrificing his daughter? Why was there an idol in David's house which David's wife used to save David from Saul, her father? (1 Sam 19: 11-16) Why did David want to build God a temple using the craft from other nations? Did Solomon face criticism when he actually built it? All of these people were not perfect.

Revivalism with emphasis on personal religious experience might encourage some, but it would also trigger the opposing emotions of many who expected faith expressed in this world. In the same way, Evangelism might enable some to understand their identity more as reborn Christians, just like what Ezra and Nehemiah did, led his people to be holy, but are these -isms, practices, systems of thinking, relevant to the kingdom of God?

God saw that the creation was good because its different parts perform their particular and assigned functions. God gave Abraham and his descendants the mission to bring God's blessing to all the families of the earth. (Gen 12:2-3) It's the blissful relationship with others that defines their identity, not their own glory. How can one enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, while on the other hand, creating broken families through the dissociation of families with intermarriage? Let the Holy Spirit work within us so that we may spread God's good ways and

good news – release, recovery, and setting free. Let such ways and words cry out to be heard and done today. Embody God's love in us through loving our neighbors as we love ourselves and extending this love even to our enemies. Amen.