



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“A WATER GATE MOMENT”

Scripture Lessons: Nehemiah 8:1-18; 2 Corinthians 8:1-24

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, October 24, 2021
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

2 Corinthians 8:1-24

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us, so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as you excel in everything in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. And in this matter, I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has not according to what one does not have. I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. As it is written, ‘The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.’

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the mediations of each of our hearts, be pleasing and even joyful in your sight. For you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This morning, I want to talk about a Water Gate moment? And no, I’m not talking about anything related the Watergate scandal of the early 1970’s. No! What I am referring to is an actual gate called the Water Gate, which is located in Jerusalem. And I suppose, one could say that this Water Gate moment about which we read in our Old Testament Lesson this morning is also a watershed moment, in the sense that it serves as the backdrop for an altogether historic moment in the history of God’s people. Now, to be certain, we have already seen any number of historic moments within God’s story of salvation. We witness the earliest formation of God’s people

upon the call of Abraham, Father Abraham, to whom was promised a people and a land. And that people, Israel as she would come to be known, we have seen her life marked not only by times of growth and renewal but also times of hunger and enslavement. We marvel at how Israel eventually became a strong and united kingdom under King David, but how it was that, as a kingdom, she eventually became divided. We are humbled when we finally come to that chapter in Israel's life, when she is overtaken and sent into exile at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who in 586 BC destroyed the city, the Temple, Israel's way of life, destroyed everything! Still, we find comfort in knowing that God never does abandon the Jewish people; indeed, God always has an eye toward their redemption.

To that point, just two weeks ago, and when we first began our stewardship sermon series, we considered how God had finally made the way clear for the Jews to return home after many years of exile. We spent most of the last two Sundays reading about Nehemiah and how he was called upon to oversee the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls; ah, but more than just the rebuilding walls, we come to realize that Nehemiah is also about God's business of rebuilding the people! We talked at some length about how Nehemiah was a man of prayer and planning, a man of patience and perseverance! And I realize that, much more can be said about Nehemiah, about how he sacrificed his own salary on matters of principle and compassion or perhaps about how he was compelled to speak up when his fellow Jews were being unjustly burdened. We could talk about those things and more but we really need to go where the text goes and this morning, the narrative shifts to one of Nehemiah's contemporaries, a Priest name Ezra. And what we know about Ezra is this: he appears on the postexilic landscape slightly before than Nehemiah, and he is extremely focused on studying God's Word, obeying it and teaching it to others. In Ezra 7:10 we read: "For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel." Ezra was a man of God, and he knew that all the joy of returning and rebuilding, it wouldn't amount to a hill of beans if the hearts of God's people were not also restored and what better way to restore them than to renew their commitments to God and to come before God in worship! And so, facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand, Ezra read straight from the book of the Law of Moses, which we know to be the Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible. I love where it says in verse 8: "they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading."

When I read that, I can't help but to imagine Ezra, standing tall atop that wooden platform and reading aloud the stories of the Bible. Reading, for example, about the time Abraham was called upon to sacrifice his Son Isaac and I picture the Levites listening to Ezra and then walking about the people saying things like, "You know that story. You remember it, right? That's where we get the name for God, Jehovah-Jireh, which means "the Lord will provide," because there on Mt. Moriah God provided a substitute for Abraham's son, that ram in the thicket." Imagine that scene, if you will. I mean, everyone was involved! They were either reading or listening or interpreting, but they were all there, gathered as one, there at the Water Gate, responding: "Amen! Amen!" Friends, is that not what we are called upon to do each Lord's Day? Of course, in our case, we do not respond to Ezra. No! We respond to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ and

we affirm that not only is he here with us spiritually, but we are also presented with a very living witness to Jesus from within pages the Bible. That we know of God's presence in this way, that is a most profound gift! That we would come to know that while we do not gather at a specific "Water Gate" per se, but that we nevertheless gather in the presence of the one who provides us with living water, the one who is the gate through which the sheep enter. Ah, such is the gift of faith which is inspired in our hearts! It is what we talked about on Rally Day, that gift to which we are called to respond, by fanning it into flame!

This morning we are invited to consider how yet another expression of Christ's Church, this one from New Testament, how it is that she responds to the gift of faith, to the presence of God in her life. In 2 Corinthians chapter 8, we are told about the churches in Macedonia who lived in a region that was especially impoverished. It was the former homeland of Alexander the Great, but when Rome conquered them, everything changed and most of their wealth was taken away. From an earthly point of view, it would certainly be understandable if not unavoidable for those churches to keep in their possession what little they had, but when they heard about the Apostle Paul's appeal to help their fellow Christians in Jerusalem who were also poor, those Macedonian churches and in spite of their circumstances, they gave not only according to their ability, but even beyond their ability! It didn't matter that they were poor in things, this was a matter of them being rich in God's grace! We even get the sense that Paul may have been reluctant to receive their gifts, perhaps because he knew just how afflicted they were, which may help us to understand why it was that these churches nearly pleaded with Paul to take their gifts, begging him earnestly "for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints."

Not unlike the people of Nehemiah's day, those Macedonian churches were facing genuine challenges. Oh, make no mistake about it, they were struggling; but in spite of all that was going on around them, they remained steadfast to the work of God in their life. Ah, be it a wall or establishing generous patterns of giving, they remained committed to what God was calling them to do. For me, the lessons learned from these communities, they are strikingly similar, for in them we see pain and suffering, but we also see God's love and God's provision and we see the people's response. Oh, Christ's Church in more recent memory, she has faced challenges, for sure, but ours have been nothing remotely close to the difficulties associated with having lived in exile and needing to start life all over again; ours is certainly not the kind of poverty which marked the life of those 1st century churches in Macedonia. But I ask you, is this any less a place where the truth about God is shared? Is this any less a Sabbath an occasion of worship, a place where the Word of God is read and proclaimed and interpreted? Is this not where we too are called to respond: "Amen and Amen." Oh, but just as it was the case for Nehemiah's audience, and the early church as well, our response can never end with a mere affirmation. It does not end with the raising of our figurative hands or the bowing of our heads. No! Our response, our best response, it is our whole response, the very expanse of our life!

I mentioned Mt. Moriah a little while ago, you may find it interesting to know that that blessed place where God provided for Abraham and for Isaac, many Biblical scholars believe that place to also be Golgotha. And if that is the case, isn't it just like God to take a place of anxiety and fear

and to claim it for the love of God; to remind us of His past provision while testifying to His greatest provision, that lamb of God which takes away the sins of the world! On this Commitment Sunday, we are invited to joyfully respond to God for the provision of His Son, and God has told us that we are to do that by giving of our time, our talent, and yes, even our treasure. In this way, our financial commitment is not to a church, nor is it to a budget. It has nothing to do with our support or the lack thereof for this ministry or that one. It has nothing to do with life going well or life going poorly. Friends, it has everything to do with life going eternally. In Nehemiah chapter 8, we are told that the people came together as one and so it happens that we will have an opportunity to demonstrate a similar kind of solidarity a little later in this service of worship. Following our Litany of Dedication, we will sing of our Hymn of Commitment. The word commitment implies a kind of setting apart or a dedication and we do respond to God with a commitment of our lives, to be sure; but during the singing of the hymn, Here I Am Lord, we will also be invited to come forward and to place our commitment cards in the basket on the Lord's Table. In this way, our offerings, our commitments, they are so much more than a transaction. They are blessing in response to God's blessings, a gift in response to God's greatest gift! I want to encourage you this morning, whether you bring a commitment card forward during the singing of the hymn or place one in one of the baskets as you leave; whether you give electronically or even at a later time, I hope that that there are no circumstances in your life that would persuade you from holding back from giving something to God, because, at the end of the day, God has held nothing back from us, not even his own Son! Amen and Amen!

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

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.