

The priest Ezra calls people back to the Torah when the exile has ended. They listen intently as he interprets the words for them, and the words give them a framework for meaning and identity. This week we grieve the loss of mission personnel who were in Haiti on our behalf, doing the work of God, the work of Christ. We see great meaning in their lives. How can we know that we live meaningful lives?

They listened – the people who had been scattered in exile.
They had returned to their city Jerusalem. Nehemiah was a provincial governor.
He had directed that the city – the wall – the temple be rebuilt.
It was their home – and the place where they knew God.
But this exile into Babylonia had been long -
and people had forgotten a lot about the past – about Torah -
about its direction for life – its comfort – its connection.

Now it was time to rebuild –
time to reconstruct life in a new way with old principles.

The story says that the people stood for hours at the Water Gate –
which is where people talked about important things.
And the ears of all were attentive – Ezra read and interpreted it for them.
He probably translated it because they probably spoke Aramaic now.
But he also interpreted it to them so it would be real to them now.



I get the sense that they were so very grateful to be back together
not only to see the city being restored – but also some reassurance -
that the world they knew would have some order to it now.



Think about the millions of people in Haiti
who would love to hear that right now -
as they stand in the rubble of what used to be their lives.

But it will be a long time before they do.



The people of Haiti have been poor.
They endured political and economic oppression for a long time.

But at least they had the ground beneath their feet -
before it heaved and rolled and shook –
destroying any semblance of order they had known.

It scattered families and coworkers and friends.
It collapsed homes – schools – businesses – churches – people.
It destroyed the Hotel Montana -
where Sam Dixon and Clinton Rabb had just stepped into the lobby.

The building began to shake -
and as Jim Gulley described at Sam's funeral yesterday -
in another second the concrete ceiling collapsed on them.

It pinned them under for 55 hours before they were reached and pulled out.

Jim and a few others in their group survived.

But Sam and Clint – did not.



These two men were the senior personnel –
the stewards who directed and implemented the work
of the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR)

and the mission volunteers of the Board of Global Ministries -
of the United Methodist Church.

These are the programs that disburse and use
the money we send from this church –
Aspen Community United Methodist Church -
in our wider mission and for UMCOR.

They were doing what they loved and what we entrusted them to do.
And surely they died knowing their lives had immense meaning.



We all want our lives to have meaning.
It would be nice to encircle ourselves in environments -
so that each way we look
we see things to do
that are part of something bigger than ourselves -
something you might say - that God has in mind.



That's what Ezra's listeners wanted in their new lives -
and so they listened intently when he read to them.
Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann tells us that
Ezra's reading of the Torah to the people that day -
is often considered the seminal event of Judaism.
He says that is when Israel became committed to its story -
and gave them their identity as Jews.¹
It gave some greater meaning to their lives.



As I worked on the electronic newsletter to send you
about Sam Dixon and Clinton Rabb –
I kept tearing up as I worked with words and images.

They were our hands reaching out to people who needed help.

They were our feet stepping over boundaries of comfort and safety -
across borders - doing exactly what we are called to do.

They were our hands and our feet.

The mission of UMCOR is to provide immediate relief for acute human need
and to respond to suffering caused by natural disaster,
political turmoil, and civil unrest.



It may seem more clear and compelling
in places of extreme need - for justice and peace and restoration.
And when we can travel and work even a little - something does happen.

To use a bit of traditional language – we could call it “conversion.”

Just talk to any of the volunteers in mission.

What is it?

I think that is when we are aware on a visceral level
of our connection with the divine – the creation in process – what we call God.



But meaning also exists wherever we are.

When we support those who whose hands become our hands -
and whose feet become our feet –
we participate in something greater than ourselves.



Meaning comes in our lives when we live in a way that reflects
a passion for life and an awareness
of what is happening in the world
and a willingness to think about more than ourselves.

Meaning comes when we live in a way that reflects love.
When we make sacrifices from time to time -
and often - for the greater good -
with our time or our talents or our money -
we're living meaningful and faithful lives.

Back about the Fourth century B.C. -
Ezra would probably say we were living according to Torah.



We did not read from the gospel today -
but I want to read from it now.

Look at Luke 4:16

Jesus had returned from the wilderness
and speaks in the synagogue in Nazareth.

(See Luke 4:16-21)

When Ezra read to the people that day
he gave them back their sense of identity.

Well – when Jesus reads from Isaiah -
he brings some of what Ezra interpreted to the people - into the present.

“Bring good news to the poor.”

What is good news to the poor?

It is certainly to try and bring relief when conditions are urgent
but it is also confronting systems that serve to
repressively keep some people down.
That went on in Haiti far too long.

“Proclaim release to the captive.”

“Recover sight to the blind.”

Let us remember Jean Arnwine of Dallas.
She was part of the 12-member team of volunteers
from the Highland Park United Methodist Church.
They were helping to staff the Haiti Eye Care Clinic
in a small village about 20 miles west of Port-au-Prince.
She died when the clinic collapsed.

When you have no access to education – it is another kind of blindness.
A major Methodist school collapsed in Port a Prince.



So – sometimes we go out ourselves - and other times – probably more often -
we send others - to be our feet that step over boundaries
and to be our hands that reach out.

In doing that we are all a part of something amazing.
In the traditional language of the Christian movement -
they called it salvation.

Because that is when something shifts inside us
somewhere around our heart – and it feels like it’s breaking open.
And you know there is a line between you and something bigger.



Well – it has been an emotional week.
People wait for water and food and medical care.
People hope that someday their lives will be livable again.



May the message of Ezra –
bringing the people back to community and belonging –
be heard one day by the people of Haiti.

And may the message of Jesus that day in Nazareth
encourage us to stay alive to the message of Spirit
and continue the work of love at all opportunities.



Let us be in prayer:
God you create us and know us -
and you surely feel our anguish when tragedy hits.
Enable us to be about the kind of living that is needed in this great world.
Help your servants to bring care and restoration - where it is needed.

And let us sometimes be those servants.

Guide us to be hands that reach out
and to be feet that travel – and take our turn.

Guide us to do what may seem like small things
that really are not all that small.

Bless this church –
that it may be an inspiration to those who come through our doors.

And bless our lives with meaning and purpose
and the vision to believe it.

Amen.

¹ *Process and Faith* Website