

It's Not Too Early To Start Celebrating

I noticed that the Christmas season started earlier than ever. I remember seeing Christmas decorations in the store as we were buying Halloween candy. I have mixed emotions about that. Yes, I don't like the commercialism that surrounds the birth of our Savior. On the other hand, I have my car radio permanently tuned to 107.9 which has round the clock Christmas music. At Church we are celebrating early with the Advent season and Wednesday Advent services. We don't mind celebrating Christmas early.

We do that for Christmas, the first coming or Advent of Jesus. Why don't we do that for his second coming? I don't know of any Second Coming of Christ trees we can put up in our homes. I don't know of any cards which state, "We wish you a happy Judgment Day." There is no radio station that plays round the clock Advent tunes like "Day of Wrath, O Day of Mourning," or "The Day is Surely Drawing Near." Rather, we tend to forget Jesus is coming back.

Friends, I hope and pray that this text from Nehemiah will change that in our lives. I pray that God the Holy Spirit would work on our hearts so we look forward to Jesus' second coming as much as we look forward to Christmas. It is not too early to celebrate his coming. We can because we live under the Lord's forgiving grace, and because he is coming back for us.

I. We celebrate because of the Lord's forgiving grace.

⁹ **Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to all of them, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the law.** ¹⁰ **Then he said to them, "Go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, since today is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, because the joy of the Lord is your strength."** ¹¹ **And the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Be still, since today is holy. Don't grieve."** ¹² **Then all the people began to eat and drink, send portions, and have a great celebration, because they had understood the words that were explained to them.** (The Christian Standard Bible)

Why was this congregation sad? Well, Nehemiah had all the people hear the Bible read to them. The "Law" mentioned in our text isn't the Ten Commandments. The Law refers to the first five books of the Bible. So it wasn't like they heard the Ten Commandments read to them over and over. In those five books they heard many wonderful things like how God created the universe, his promise of salvation in the Garden of Eden, how God saved a remnant from the flood, and how God delivered them from slavery in Egypt. So why did they cry? They cried because they realized how much they have ignored the Lord over the years. They hadn't read any of that for years, maybe even a generation. They hadn't celebrated Passover for several generations now. They stopped observing the Sabbath. As we will hear in a moment, they didn't even celebrate the feast of the Tabernacles or Booths since the days of Joshua. That's hundreds of years. It would be like someone moving to Arlington and he asks you, "Do you have any Christmas services?" You say, "We haven't celebrated Christmas in years."

Friends, do you feel a little prick of the conscience right now? How many times do we neglect God and his worship services? And when we come, we often consider it a chore. We don't sing loudly, we mumble the words. And if I told you Jesus is coming back tonight, would that make you happy, panicky or sad? What would be our excuses? Why would we wish Jesus would not come back for a while? Is it because we want to enjoy retirement or kids or grandkids more than going to heaven?

But there is a really neat passage in our text. **Then he said to them, "Go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, since today is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, because the joy of the Lord is your strength."** The people were ashamed of how much they neglected God. They expected a tongue lashing, maybe even fire and brimstone from heaven. What did Nehemiah give them? He told them to celebrate. When I read this I thought of parents who told their kids to clean the house and wash the dishes and do other things while they went shopping. When they got home, they found the house trashed. The dishes were not done. The kids thought it fun to slice open the bag of flour and make a snowman out of it. Furniture was overturned. It was a disaster. The kids realized they were in trouble. But instead of yelling at them, mom and dad say, "Well, get your coats. Let's go out to a restaurant and have a good meal."

That's what Nehemiah told the people. They had neglected the Lord. It saddened them. So he tells them to celebrate? Why? Because the Lord is gracious and forgiving. Friends, you will never find that in the world except through God and Jesus. The justice system, business, even sports all live by the rule that you do good and you will be rewarded, and if you do bad, you get punished. But God sent Jesus to be our Savior. Because of him he does not treat us as our sins deserve. God punished Jesus who had no sin, so he could give us a seat next to Jesus in heaven. The Bible calls that grace.

Got a raise, or even found a job? Celebrate. Found out you are expecting a child? Celebrate. God forgives you in Jesus? Celebrate.

II. Celebrate now, the Jesus is coming back for you.

But we don't have to wait until Jesus comes back to celebrate. ¹³ **On the second day, the family heads of all the people, along with the priests and Levites, assembled before the scribe Ezra to study the words of the law.** ¹⁴ **They found written in the law how**

the Lord had commanded through Moses that the Israelites should dwell in shelters during the festival of the seventh month.¹⁵ So they proclaimed and spread this news throughout their towns and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the hill country and bring back branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make shelters, just as it is written."¹⁶ The people went out, brought back branches, and made shelters for themselves on each of their rooftops and courtyards, the court of the house of God, the square by the Water Gate, and the square by the Ephraim Gate.¹⁷ The whole community that had returned from exile made shelters and lived in them. The Israelites had not celebrated like this from the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day. And there was tremendous joy.¹⁸ Ezra read out of the book of the law of God every day, from the first day to the last. The Israelites celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance. (The Christian Standard Bible.)

What is described here is an Old Testament festival called the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles. This, too, the people neglected for hundreds of years. Each year, the people were to build small shelters out of branches. No, you can't use an RV or fancy tent. For a week they would stay in them. Why? To remind the people how they wandered in the wilderness for forty years, living in tents, before they entered the Promised Land and built permanent homes. It was actually a very festive thing. Kids would play. People exchanged candy and goodies. It would be like our Christmas celebration with its joy and happiness.

Friends, we are a little different than the Old Testament believers. They celebrated something in the past. We are different in that we celebrate something in the future. Right now, you and I are living in tents, temporary existence here on earth. Our permanent home awaits us in heaven. What can we do to remember that we are in tents now?

We don't have to look hard or long. I got my hair cut last week, and I was upset that the clumps of hair on the floor are almost pure white. Just look in the mirror. In fallen world, things wear out and are not permanent. Hair grows white. We slow and wear down. Want more? Ask a couple who are in their 80's. Ask them where the time went. It went by so quickly. It is fleeting.

Want another booth to live in? Come to church. Churches are like hose map apps we have on our phones. Any church is suppose to tell you where you are and where you are going. Right now, we are poor, miserable sinners who should face God the Judge someday. But because of Christ, we are forgiven and redeemed children of God Christ is coming back and will say, "Come and take your inheritance in heaven." So church should remind us we are here now, but will be there soon.

These booths are to make us celebrate. I like our Epistle reading from earlier. **"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."** Rejoice? Why? Paul was in prison when he wrote this. He had scars on his back from whippings. Yet, we can rejoice in the worse of times because our Lord is near. Does this mean the husband will dance and shout and do high fives when his wife dies? No. It means he will weep and mourn, but he will rejoice because soon her grave will open. Soon there will be no more tears. And yes, she is now in heaven.

Lights, Christmas trees, Christmas music all help us celebrate Christmas before it comes. We can celebrate his second coming without trees or carols or lights. Paul says to simply let our gentleness be seen by all. We do when we are not anxious about things as we take it to the Lord in prayer. It means being filled with a peace that God gives, a peace which is beyond human understanding.

I got some good news and some bad news for you today. The bad news is you are going to leave all of this behind. Now the good news. You are going to leave all of this behind. Celebrate. It is not too early. Amen.