

# Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Old Testament, Year C

## WATER GATE CONFESSIONS

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Analysis by Michael Hoy

1All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. 2Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. 3He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. 5And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. 8 So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. 9And Nehemiah, who was governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people,

“This day is holy the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. 10Then he said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to 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.

## **DIAGNOSIS: Confessions of Guilt**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Hypocrisy**

There was a man at another Watergate many year ago who said, “I’m not a crook.” Turns out he was not telling the truth. But when it comes to the truth, this Water Gate does not let us off the hook either. Standing up before the readings to which we are attentive in listening, lifting up our hands and shouting our “Amen, Amen,” engaging in bowing and worshipping, there is something much darker beneath the surface of our lives. We’re not telling the truth, not before the law that is read. We’re not fooling anybody, least of all God.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Weeping**

What we find after all of Ezra’s preaching and teaching is that the people begin to weep. Was it because this was a long day of listening and standing on our feet (morning to midday)? No, the weeping is deeper than that, much more honest. “They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (v. 8). This should provoke a pregnant pause. When it comes to the law, weeping is a sign that the truth is starting to settle in. As this word gives “the sense” and there is “understanding,” we

weep because we realize our own guilt as we stand at his crossroad, at this Water Gate. Mea culpa! We realize that we have not lived up to what the law has called us to live up to. We have neglected those that the law has called us not to neglect. We have not put God first, but ourselves.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Diagnosis): Judgment by the Law**

Perhaps it was not the reaction that Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites were expecting. They seem to want to soften the blow. Preachers do that a lot when it comes to the law, and it seems especially at this most critical point. But truth be told, we are not only feeling guilty. We are guilty, at the Water Gate, standing naked before this truth; and this judgment is not so easily erased.

### **PROGNOSIS: Confessions of New Life**

#### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Prognosis): The Lord Is Your Strength!**

How do we, then, parlay this legitimate weeping into something else, something more positive and more fruit-full, even fruit-bearing for our lives? The strength that will lead us beyond the depths of our hypocrisy must come from something other than ourselves. And truth be told, it is that Word that finally brings life. So he does! And precisely by taking center stage for us, taking the guilt upon himself; taking it to the cross so that in our hearing his cheering news the promise is fulfilled. The Lord is your strength! He is the One who takes away the truth of our sin and gives us instead the life we need.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Prognosis): Rejoicing**

That leads to a different reaction to this new Word of God. This new Word sheds new light for our hearing and understanding. No longer weeping, we rejoice! We rejoice because we are loved and embraced by God in spite of all our fallen state of guilt, in spite of the truth that would otherwise damn us all. Rejoicing is a way of turning our tears around, trading weeping for joy, finding solace in the love of God that will not let us go.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Prognosis): Sending Portions**

Rejoicing spells a time of living beyond the hypocrisies of greed and crookedness. It means celebrating in the richness of the feast, "the fat" and "sweet wine," and also sending the "portions to those for whom nothing is prepared." We needn't look far to find them, not even in today's world. It's a Water-Gate, water-shed moment, waiting for all the world to celebrate, even and maybe most especially those fearful about the truth. Rejoice! The Lord is your strength!