

“Everybody Loves a Parade” Nehemiah 12:27-47

Allyson and I stood silent on Main Street, Main Street USA, that is, looking at the Castle we both had seen and admired from afar, hundreds of time before on the our t.v. screens every Sunday night, for as long as we could both remember. Tears were flowing uncontrollably as we couldn't believe we were actually at Disney World: “The Wonderful World of Disney!” After we looked away from the Castle we begin frantically looking up and down the street. People were beginning to fill up the sidewalks. It was getting more and more crowded and we knew why because the time was approaching. So we rushed to a spot not too far away from where we were standing. We had found, what we believed to be, the perfect spot, and sat on the “so-clean-you-could-eat-off-it” sidewalk to wait. And then there was a larger crowd, thousands of people now lined the streets, nearly as far back as the eye could see. Thank goodness we had come so early or we would have been those people at the back trying to look over or look past that 6 foot 4 inch Dad with kid on shoulder and Mickey Mouse ears on top of the kid's head. “Why would any of us come and wait for hours or lineup 50 deep to watch a 12 minute presentation,” I thought? But when the music started and the street was filled with strange looking animals we had our answer. Maybe it's true what they say, “Everybody Loves a Parade.”

I'm not sure if people were surprised the day Nehemiah sought out the people of God to see about a “parade” in Jerusalem. It had been so long since the last parade that no one was alive to even remember it. The wall was complete. The people had mourned (then told by Nehemiah to stop and rejoice) and then the people mourned once again (but this time told not to stop). And then back to rejoicing, a rejoicing that would continue for around 400 years. But first it was time to dedicate the wall. You know... do some kind of ceremony that recognized all the time, work, effort and money that went into completing a project that many thought would never actually happen. It may seem slightly odd (not that the walls would be dedicated) but the timing of the dedication, at least at this point in the story. No one knows for sure exactly how much time had passed since the wall was completed - way back in chapter 6. It certainly would have been more fitting, you would think, to do the dedication then – when the wall was just finished. At least that's how we did it here at KesPres. The paint was barely dry on the walls here when we “dedicated” our own permanent place of worship on Woodbine Avenue way back in 1997. So, why the delay in our story? Maybe it had something to do with the book in its entirety, and what we might consider the “climax” of the book? Or maybe it has something to do with the “outline” of the book itself. Remember the book of Nehemiah, as I've mentioned before, can be divided into two parts. The first (and much longer

part) concerns the rebuilding of the walls, a task that Nehemiah played the leading role. (This is chapter 1 to 7). The second and shorter part concerns the revival in Jerusalem and the rededicating of the people. In the rebuilding of the people, Nehemiah stepped aside and allowed the priest Ezra to have the leading role. (This part goes from Nehemiah 8 to Nehemiah 12 verse 26.) So what you may not initially see is that the dedication of the walls, in our passage this morning, puts these two important sections together. We know this because of what happened on the day of the dedication.

The narrative tells us how Nehemiah brought “some” of the Levites, musicians, and singers from the outlying regions of the country to one part of the wall (by the Dung Gate) and staged a parade and Ezra led a second procession (the rest of the people) in the other direction around the wall beginning at the Tower of the Ovens. Each group was led by musicians and choirs that “sang praises to God” and “gave thanks to Him,” we are told. Now we’re not sure how long the parade actually took but we can assume it took longer than the 12 minute Disney Parade. We’re also not sure exactly the songs that were sung or the praises proclaimed in the parade but we do know where both of these groups converged. Both groups met at the Temple. The people’s parade, divided into two parades, with Nehemiah leading one and Ezra leading the other, ended at the Temple. Now much of Nehemiah speaks about the rebuilding of the wall (that’s a given) and slightly less is shared on the rebuilding of the people and even less on the rebuilding of the Temple. But here, in just a few verses, our story reaches its pinnacle and that pinnacle is none other than what is spoken of least but thought of most, which was the Temple. It’s not about the amount of verses that matter but the placement of those verses that is critical. So it’s no accident then that the two groups meet at the Temple. The Temple was not on the wall so the point where they ended their parade would not have naturally ended “on” the wall. It was therefore a decision made that the parade would not conclude on the wall but end at the Temple. The Temple is where the people converged. After all the people had been through, after all Nehemiah and Ezra had been through the Temple was the natural gathering point for them all, just as it should be for us. Which leads us to ask, What if our “Temple,” that is, our own KesPres, became the center of our community?

We joked soon after this piece of property was graciously given to us by a fund set up by the National Church called, “Live the Vision” that our church, here on Woodbine Ave would be the “Gateway into Keswick.” I still love that image. And then that image was reinforced when the Keswick sign was placed on our property (the sign you have to look around or look under when trying to get out of our parking lot onto Woodbine Ave) by the Town. The people of Jerusalem went

to the Temple. The people of God gather at the Church. But it's not so much about them coming (even though that's important) but the result of their coming together and the impact it had on the community that I find most interesting and intriguing. As I read and then re-read and read once more Nehemiah 12, one verse in particular, constantly and naturally highlighted itself in my reading. I just couldn't escape the latter part of verse 43. And is still that verse that I want us all to be reminded of this morning. When the parade ended and the people of God gathered to worship God did you notice what happened. The parade had gone by the people's homes and just like every Santa Clause parade the person you had been waiting for, finally arrived. There was Mickey Mouse with his weird squeaky voice coming over the speakers hid in the trees and stones welcoming us to Disney World. And then he passed and it was over. The crowd dispersed almost as quickly as it had gathered. And then the Disney staff with brooms in hand cleaned, cleaned so well, that you would have never known we or anyone else was there let alone a parade. But the smiles and the joy present during the parade, remained long after the last float took the last turn around the last corner. There are not too many parades that I can think of in Scripture. The only other parade that comes to mind for me, also happened in Jerusalem (some 4000 years later) but still the same "joy," I believe, was felt that day as well. But then again that's what should happen every time the church gathers. Our lesson this morning tells us "God made them rejoice." Now don't get me wrong or misunderstand. "Made me" doesn't have the same connotation that it does today. "My Dad made me do my homework." "My Mom made me clean my room." "The police trap made me slow down." This is no forcing someone to do something that they would rather not do nor chose to do. No, we read this as it was meant to be read, "We were made or created to rejoice." In other words from the moment we breathed our first breath we were made to rejoice in the God who made us. I know what some of you are thinking. Why don't you come over tomorrow morning at 3am and listen to my crying baby and tell me she was made to rejoice. Or come to the funeral with me this coming Saturday and sit near the wife and children who lost their Dad – far too early – and you tell me they were made to rejoice. But I've seen it, seen it with my own eyes. I've seen the inexpressible joy on the face of a child after the tears. I've witnessed the joy of the widow amidst the loss, rejoicing in a God who comes close. You and I were made to rejoice. It's at the very core of our DNA for God Himself is pure Joy. So when we, the created, encounter the Creator and experience his mercy, his love, his forgiveness and grace we are not simply left smiling but we are filled with an inexpressible joy. "Who are we that God is mindful of us," writes the Psalmist. To experience this kind of God we are changed, never the same again. To harbor hate, to live with anger or resentment, to display no emotion whatsoever means that we have not encountered the

God of Scripture or the resurrected Jesus. Encountering the God made known in Jesus Christ, here in this place, begins here every Sunday morning, as we “parade” from different parts of Georgina and beyond because we leave our homes with great joy. And trust me when I say your neighbours see that as you leave, sometimes wondering, “Where do you go every Sunday morning?” So it’s no wonder that Nehemiah declares (concerning the parade) that the “joy of Jerusalem was heard from far away.” Isn’t that a great image too imagine? I know some of us might find KesPres “loud” on a Sunday morning with the kids running about or finding those instruments at the back of the church or hear them running with great enthusiasm in the gym. I know our worship team can be loud at times, especially if you grew up in a church where there was just one instrument and nothing was miced. And our sanctuary, I am well aware, with its concrete walls, has sound bouncing from one wall to another and then back to the original wall, which makes it very loud in here. But I don’t want you to simply “think” just about the “sounds” within this place necessarily that others might hear as they drive by, but the sound of us, God’s people parading here every Sunday morning from all over Georgina and beyond but also about our parade out of this place back to our homes, or to small or GROW groups, or to Tot’s Time or Youth Group or Wimpy’s, Those parades are equally as important but still they originate here.

The communities where our homes are located, the street on which we live and the neighbours of whom we associate are looking for more joy. The world is full of sadness, despair, disappointment, anger and hatred. And sad to say many churches can be described in the very similar way. But imagine the difference if KesPres was a different. Imagine the impact we could make on our community, our neighbourhood, our street, if the people hear us on a Sunday morning as they pass by in their cars or even more hear stories about a joyful place called, KesPres? That’s the kind of joyful sound that could be heard, not only near, but far away! Because everybody loves a parade!