

Epiphany 3, Year C, January 23, 2022  
Nehemiah 8:1-10; Luke 4:14-21  
Epiphany, Winnipeg

On a quiet August afternoon when I was in my teens I sat with my grandma on the front step of their home in Edmonton. I'd taken a little detour on the drive home to Calgary from Camrose and stopped in at their place for some coffee and some good grandma supper and a place to stay for the night.

Grandma had settled into a "telling stories about days gone by" track. She talked about being young on a farm in Southern Saskatchewan, and of a budding romance with grandpa. Raising kids in Southern Alberta; kids bundled up good and warm while she and grandpa took a horse and buggy across February fields to play at a barn dance at the neighbours' place. She talked for an hour or two, but it wasn't the kind of talking for hours where you listen and your eyes glaze over and you act like you're paying attention. I could have stayed right there and listened for hours. It didn't happen every time we got together. But this time it stuck.

It wasn't all romanticized stories about idyllic lives in a less busy time though. Grandma hinted at stories of if not quite poverty then certainly not wealth. There were stories that had undertones of conflict and sometimes something...harder than that...because no family story or community story has escaped those things. And there were a few times when she would just say the name of a son who died as a toddler, and in just a second or two the whole story of his last days would play though in detail in my mind; I already knew that story so well.

That afternoon on the front step at grandma and grandpa's is one of those little pieces of time that has stayed with me and shaped me somehow. My roots were sunk a little deeper that day, and I knew the story of my people and myself better than I ever had before, and I saw for the first time some of the pieces I might not have wanted to see. I knew a little better after that who I am, and who my family is, and even what these places – even the not-so-good ones - in our past were and are.

The story that we heard from the book of Nehemiah is kind of a “sitting on the porch and listening to grandma's stories” moment for the people of Israel. They haven't heard the stories much for quite a while, because sometime around a hundred and fifty years earlier their land was invaded, and the city and the temple were ruined. So many of Israel's people had been taken off and forced to live far away in Babylon for generations, while some were left behind in a place so broken and weak. After seventy or so years the exiles were allowed to go back home, and to start rebuilding the temple and the city, and now at the time of this story from Nehemiah, most of the rebuilding is done and their home is restored and strong, and the people are gathered together at the temple. They call to the priests and say, “Bring the books, and read to us the teachings of our God.”

So the teachings are read. They tell of things from long ago; stories woven together with teachings from a time when their ancestors wandered lost in the wilderness, when they were learning how to be God's people, when their own roots were being sunk into the soil of their own families and communities and land and faith. They heard stories that would tell them who they are, who their

ancestors are; they heard teachings that would tell them how to live as God's people. And as they listened and heard, they wept. They wept because they had forgotten these stories and when the stories were told the memories came flooding back. They wept because some had never heard this teaching before and they started to learn for the first time who they are. And they wept because when they hear the teachings of their God – even simple things like loving God and loving your neighbour – they realized how far they had drifted from what God had called them to be.

Hearing the best and the worst of who you have been can make anyone weep. Tears of joy, tears of sadness, maybe even tears of shame.

There's something about hearing our own story that can have this effect on us all. Maybe it's a bit like this (and although it starts out light I don't mean to trivialize anything). One morning last summer I sat at the dining room table with my phone propped up against a candlestick, and I was watching the final game of Olympic women's soccer. When that final penalty kick went in, I stood up and threw my arms in the air, and I burst into tears. And even now – just two weeks ago, actually – if I feel like I need an emotional moment I just call that up on YouTube and watch it again and quietly shed a tear. It's just part of the story of this country I love. I can get the same effect from the men's hockey final at the Vancouver Olympics. Still makes me cry. It somehow feeds my roots.

But for years now we've all had to learn to sit still and listen while other stories of this country are told. Stories of residential schools and unmarked graves and stolen land. Stories of racial profiling and people being pulled over for Driving

While Black. Stories of children in poverty while we keep hearing the story that it's just such a great country.

It's a beautiful land. The stories of home can make some of us weep with joy and gratitude. It's a broken land, and the stories of home can make some of us weep with grief and some of us weep with shame. Or just stop listening.

Stories of the church – worldwide or right here – stories of a city or a town, stories of a relationship. They're mixed, and they tell us who we are and where we've been. They shape us for when we get up off the front step and move on to whatever life brings next.

Jesus, of course, tells the story too. He's gone home to Nazareth, to the place where his mom and dad raised him. He goes to the synagogue and gets up to read. He opens up the scripture that the people there already know, and he reads what's been read and spoken a thousand times before...just like when Kelly got up here to read. He reads a piece of the people's story from Isaiah chapter 61: "The spirit of God is upon me, because God has called me to bring good news to the poor, and release to the prisoners, and sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed, and relief to those crushed by debt."

When he tells that piece of the story he is telling the story of people who have known suffering and of people who have caused those people to suffer. He's telling of the old days, and the days now, and the days yet to come, of people who have been oppressed and of those who are oppressing them. He's telling the story of those in prison and those who have put them there. He's telling a piece of the story that will make some weep with shame, some weep with grief and some

with relief at good news. He's telling that story that is a promise of freedom, of sight, of release and relief.

And when he's done telling the story he says this: "Today this is being fulfilled in your hearing."

We'll hear more next week about how that news is received. But for now, just get caught up in the story. Go sit on the front step this afternoon – bring a jacket! - and tell a few stories. Make sure you tell them all – or at least mix them up if you're not ready to tell all - and make sure you listen to them all. The ones you want to hear and the ones you'd rather not. The ones you want to tell and the ones it's just too hard to tell. The stories that make you laugh and weep with joy, the stories that leave you silent or weeping or ashamed. And hear that piece of the story that's always being told, the one Jesus reads from Isaiah, the one about freedom and release and relief. And know that that story is coming true.

Then get up off the step, stretch a bit, and set off into the next piece of the story.

AMEN