

Divine Mercy Parish - Singapore
Triduum Mass – Thursday Oct. 3, 2013
Nehemiah 8:1-4, 5-6, 7-12 & Luke 10:1-12

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezertich, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: *“Master of the Universe, listen! I don’t know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer.” And again the miracle would be accomplished.*

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sassov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say, *“Divine Master, I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient.”* It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, too feeble to move, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: *“I am too old to find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient. And it was sufficient.*

God made man because he loves stories.

This story, taken from Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel’s book, *“The Gates of the Forest,”* reminds us how we are addicted to stories. We tell and listen to all kinds of stories: sad stories and happy stories, stories about work, stories about play, stories about sports, stories about friendships, stories about dreams and stories about faith. We turn out pain into narrative so we can bear it; we turn our ecstasy into narrative so we can prolong it. We all seem to be under the sentence of Scheherazade. We tell stories to live.

But there is a deeper suggestion in Wiesel’s phrase. God not only loves to hear our stories but God loves to tell his own. And, quite simply, we are the story God tells. Our very lives are the words that come from his mouth.

So, I am among you again as a storyteller. Not any kind of storyteller, but one who reflects on religious figures integral to the stories of salvation history, gospel stories and stories of saints.

This Triduum of Masses culminating with the feast day of St. Faustina on Saturday will celebrate the stories of God, that expand our world so we can see it with God’s eyes, convert our hearts again so we can embrace it with God’s heart and change our

behavior again so it conforms to Godly ways of living. This is how we stay engaged with God who is the centerpiece of our stories that have eternal worth and value.

Keep in mind the stories are first; we are second. We are born into a community of stories and storytellers. My mother told me that on the day I was born I had so much hair that she told the nurses: "Give him a haircut!" It's a story that stuck with me.

Everybody here has a story to tell about the day you were born, the day you took your first steps, spoke your first sentence, had your first birthday, completed your first bicycle ride without training wheels, made your first soccer goal, had a first date, etc.

Then came the stories of our religious traditions, how to make the sign of the cross correctly then later knowing what it meant, how to genuflect without appearing awkward then later growing in faith to know what that meant, how to be prepared for First Communion, how to grow in being reverent in the Real Presence of the Divine, how to mature in knowing when to access the Holy Spirit as a voice that awakens a different light inside from the outer secular lights of fame or fortune, consumerism and acquiring, greed and abusing.

So, as the preacher let me interpret the stories of God we just heard to rediscover again who we are and what we must do to find ourselves in these stories in order to find God who wants to be found. For in telling the stories of God, and reflecting on them we celebrate again that we are the beginning and the end of those stories because we are the beginning and end of God's love story with humanity.

The first reading is from an unfamiliar book of the Old Testament. Nehemiah is not a popular name. If truth be told I don't know anybody by the name of Nehemiah. I've never seen the name in a telephone book, read it as the name of a character in a novel, heard it in a Shakesperean play or addressed a card or note to anyone by that name.

For that very reason, because of its uniqueness, it should capture our attention in a way that the inner ear of our heart awakens us to awareness, that, just the sound of the name *Nehemiah* means that we are going to be drawn into a story of God.

He is a deeply religious man of tireless energy who organized the effort to restore the rotting walls of Jerusalem about the year 440 BC. He is the speaker of his own story. While he is still serving the Persian King he tells the story about the sad state of affairs of his native city. The king grants his request to go and rebuild the walls and city gates so that the people of Jerusalem may have protection from their enemies.

In today's first reading, we meet Ezra, another name who is not in the call log of my mobile phone. I don't know anyone named Ezra just like I don't know anyone named Nehemiah. But, the point is God knows them, which is why they are in this God story.

Ezra is a Jewish priest skilled in the Law of Moses. He played a vital role in shaping the religious destiny of the Jewish people after their return home from the Babylonian exile. Ezra was among those Jews who did not go back to Palestine soon after the Persian king gave them their freedom in 539 BC. In time, however, he felt called to shape the life of the people according to the ideals of Moses. We find him in today's reading proclaiming the book of the law to the people of Jerusalem. We don't know the contents of the reading. We only know the people's reaction. Tears, weeping, sadness, all evoked because the word of God was being proclaimed in their homeland. They are no longer exiled from God or themselves. They are home with their feet planted firmly on their native soil and the God who journeyed with them in exile has welcomed them home.

Like a skilled psycho-therapist, both Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the faithful servant turn the hearts of the people of Jerusalem toward rejoicing, feasting and sharing. They awaken the people to the truth that their story did not end in exile but in return. Embracing it is the antidote to the sadness that tricks them into thinking they are still in exile. Sharing portions of their blessings and bounty with others awakens them to the presence of God in this new chapter of their story; God who reverses misfortune with blessing and sadness with rejoicing.

The people become the end of the story when they respond to the call to rebuild the walls and gates of the city. They stood against a group of people and voices who tried to frustrate their efforts. So what began as a story about exile and return, about listening and weeping, about rejoicing and feasting becomes a vocation story; a call to mobilize, to act, to take back their heart from sadness and "to give joy to the heart" as the Psalmist invited us to pray.

This vocation story is a prelude to the gospel where Jesus invites seventy-two disciples to be his first vocations and preach God's kingdom to the towns of Galilee. How they preach this kingdom is as important as that they preach it. Their job description: keep it simple. Don't clutter your life with a lot of baggage. Be a peaceful person. Be grateful for the hospitality of others. Stay among a village long enough to heal the sick, preach the good news. And if you are rejected be free enough interiorly to let go and move on. Conserve your energy for those open to the good news. The mission is not about winning or losing, it's not about keeping score or feeling insecure so that you have to have the last word. Rather, it's but about telling the story that God loves us even when we feel unworthy of it. In their apprenticeship as disciples they had to learn how to get out of God's way. Their vocation was to be seed sowers only. Whatever fruit came from their efforts was not for their glory but for God's.

This had to be a radically new challenge for the seventy-two. What they needed the most was the religious imagination to do it.

Let me share something about imagination then connect it with these two readings and with this Triduum Mass.

I have a friend who works for the Disney Corporation in Florida. When they hire engineers to help them design new rides for their theme parks they are not interested in their academic credentials. What they look for is their capacity to imagine how a new ride should be designed, built and operated. They want a combination of both your engineering skills and the wildness of your imagination. If you are hired then you are called an "Imagineer" not an Engineer.

These first vocations, the seventy-two disciples in the gospel reading, had to have both good preaching skills and a wild imagination. There was no manual, no textbook for how to witness and preach the kingdom of God.

I want to sow a seed in this first Triduum Mass for you to begin accessing your religious imagination and to imagine what a Vocations Ministry in the parish might look like. Look around you and notice who are the young people serving the gospel? Whose hearts give evidence of the two virtues Pope Francis espouses for service of the gospel: being meek and merciful? How would you excite these young people to tap into their own imagination about serving the Church as priests, religious, missionaries, lay ministers?

Using your imagination does not require degrees or theological reading. It requires a shifting of vision. It requires envisioning a church with a future. It requires envisioning how young people will shape that future church and how they can excite us about being part of it. It requires the creative ability to help young people imagine how they can be a resource for imagining how the future of the Church is in their hands. It requires a desire to help them tap into their religious imagination so they respond to Jesus as the seventy-two responded. It requires that you imagine the parish as a school for ministry.

Nehemiah and Ezra tapped into the religious imagination of the chosen people to rebuild the city of Jerusalem after their return from exile. Jesus tapped into the religious imagination of seventy-two followers to proclaim the kingdom of God, to heal the sick, forgive sinners, and bring peace with little schooling. In doing that they became the end of this piece of God's story.

Now you are that story. The seed I sow among as a preacher is to imagine a new Vocations Ministry so that the new seventy-two disciples from Divine Mercy Parish will become a new story for future generation of Catholics who will embrace the good news of the kingdom of God through the power of your witness, the wildness of your imagination and the depth of your faith which we renew again in this eucharist, the great gift of God's imagination to us.

Amen.

