

I'm always looking for connections:

- between the Old Testament and the New Testament
- between our Sunday Scripture readings and our daily lives
- and between things that happen in the news and things that happen in the Bible

Well, this week I've found all three and I'm excited to share them with you.
So here we go.

The key word that ties together all three of these connections is the word: Rebuilding. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel were often involved in a rebuilding project. Archeologists in the Middle East have discovered ancient hills or mounds full of historical artifacts. And they can see by all the layers how many generations have been living and rebuilding on the same spot.

But for the people of Israel the two biggest rebuilding projects were temple and the walls of Jerusalem. And as we discover in this week's chapter of *The Story* God was using both of these rebuilding projects to prepare them for the most important rebuilding project of all:

God's plan to redeem and restore all people, all nations, everything in creation- to a life of wholeness, shalom, salvation.

This Sunday, as we come to the end of 21 weeks of God's story from Genesis to Malachi. we've seen God's Hesed – God's steadfast love, God's never-ending patient love for His people.

While there is certainly darkness in the Old Testament, just like there is darkness in our world today, the overarching message from Genesis to Malachi, is God's desire to live in communion with His creation.

We've been on a journey these last 21 weeks –
we've seen the highs:

God's glorious creation, His covenant promises, the Exodus, and the promised Land, the giving of the Law to Moses, spirit-filled Judges, prophets, and courageous leaders.

And we've seen the lows:

the constant rebellion and turning away from God
wicked kings, and faithless people.

And today we stand together with all the exiles who have returned to Jerusalem.
They've hit their rock bottom.

Maybe they were feeling what we feel on Ash Wednesday when we hear the call from the prophet Joel... "Return to the Lord your God" and we come before God in humble repentance.

The exiles are ready to hear a redemption story.
They have their temple, they have new walls built around their city – but it's not enough.

Like we know it's not enough just to have material things.
We have our homes.
We have this beautiful sanctuary but it's not enough.
Our souls hunger for more.

And so did the exiles in Jerusalem.

So they initiate an event that is not Nehemiah's idea, not even Ezra the priest's idea.
It is the people's idea.

They all gather together at the Water Gate –thousands of them – men, women, and children.
They tell Ezra to bring out the book of Moses.

Now get this, it had been 140 years since they had heard God's Word read to them.
So let's think about how long 140 years is.
My dad was born in 1937 and his dad about 30 years before that
and my great grandfather, about 30 years before that.
That's almost 140 years ago.

Imagine this morning, if no one here today, and no one for two or three generations before
that, had heard God's Word read to them.
You and I would be spiritually famished. We would be hungry for God's Word.

That's what was happening with the exiles.
They had hit their rock bottom, they had been humbled,
and now they were eager to hear God speak to them.

Imagine how spiritually sensitive they were
hanging on every word that came from the mouth of God.

Ezra intends to read the entire Book of the Law, the Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible,
to help them begin the most important rebuilding project in their lives
the redemption of their souls
the work God does in and through us to bring us shalom – lasting peace and salvation.

So Ezra begins reading for several hours, daybreak until noon
but something quite unexpected happens.
As Ezra reads God's Word to them,
they hear God's laws, God's good and loving boundaries for their lives, and they begin to weep
and mourn. And the more Ezra reads, the louder their wailing.

They hear God's boundaries, boundaries created out of love, boundaries they have broken, and they experience a Godly sorrow, they are heartbroken over their failure to love God and obey.

It wasn't like a tent meeting with a fire and brimstone preacher convicting them with loud and angry preaching.

Rather, their hearts were open and spiritually sensitive and as they heard God's Word read them, and as the Levites, circulated among the people and explained the sense and the meaning of what Ezra had read, they were overwhelmed with a spirit of repentance.

Nehemiah who was standing next to Ezra, sees the tears forming in their eyes, he sees their grief and then he does something unexpected.

Instead of allowing them to continue in their grief he tells them this is not the time for mourning, but for a celebration.

Did that confuse you at first, when you read this?
You would think their godly sorrow was a good thing, right?

They had finally reached the point they were open to hearing God's Word, and it was affecting them deeply.

Why do you think Nehemiah, tells them this is not a time for mourning?

Let me ask it this way, "Did God want them to stay in sack cloth and ashes?"
"Is that where God wants us to stay?"

This season of Lent, is a season of repentance.
And during this season God does call us to return, to humble ourselves and yes, express a godly sorrow over our sin.

But like a parent, who sees the tears welling up in a child's eyes, when the child knows they have done something wrong – a good and loving parent doesn't say, "see, I told you so... now go to your room and cry some more."

Like a good and loving parents, God sees our sorrow, God sees that we are heartbroken over our sin, and God calls into a new day. And that's what Nehemiah did.

He called out to the people and said,
"Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks,

and send some to those who have nothing prepared.
This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”¹

There is a time to mourn, and a time dance.

This is a holy day because God has seen your sorrow,
and Godly sorrow leads to repentance
and repentance leads right back to God – not a stern, unforgiving God...
but God, whose heart is full of mercy, and compassion, and unconditional forgiveness.

The Lord of the Dance is about to bring a new day.

Death and sin will no longer have the last word.
Crying and mourning, and pain will be no more.
Horrible things that we read about in the news, like the ISIS killings will be no more.
The evil one, will no longer bring suffering to this world.

Today, as we stand at the bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament,
between the Old Covenant, that was given through Moses, and the New Covenant established
by Jesus, we begin to see a new day coming.

The last person to speak before the Old Testament comes to a close is Malachi.
He tells us that the next prophet who is going to speak for God
will introduce us to the One we have been waiting for.
He will introduce us to the Messiah.

Do you remember the name of this new messenger?
When we open the New Testament, we see he is talking about John the Baptist.
Matthew tells us, "In those days John the Baptist came,
preaching in the wilderness and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'
This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah."

Isaiah foretold the role of John the Baptist, and now Malachi restates it.
Malachi foretells that the next time God speaks— which will be four hundred years later —

God will speak through John the Baptist, the one preparing the way for the Lord.

And the kingdom of heaven, did come near.
The King of Heaven, Jesus, God’s son, the Messiah, came near
and began a rebuilding project like none other – one that Jesus begins in you and me.
This is how Malachi describes that day:

“On the day when I act,” says the Lord Almighty,
“they will be my treasured possession.

“I will spare them, just as a loving father has compassion and spares his son who serves him.

And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked,
between those who serve God and those who do not.”

And then Malachi closes with these beautiful and poetic words – a day of judgment is coming,

“but for you who revere my name,
the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.”

May the healing, and wholeness and salvation
we find in Jesus the Messiah, be yours today and every day. Amen.

¹ Nehemiah 8:10