

**Neh. 8:1–3, 5–6,
8–10**

Ps. 19

1 Cor. 12:12–31a

Luke 4:14–21

Attending to the Word

Goal for the Session

Adults will discover how the Word read and interpreted can open each new generation to understanding, renewal, and joy.

■ P R E P A R I N G F O R T H E S E S S I O N

Focus on Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Kathleen M. O’Connor

The covenant renewal of all the people calls them to unity and invites them to renew life in their God. Rather than seeing divine instruction as cramping, restricting legislation, the Jews, then and now, recognize Torah as a compassionate guide, a pathway, a set of wise instructions about how to live together in justice and joy. But that guide and that path have not been sealed forever in concrete at Sinai. Instead, they must be reinterpreted to show the path to community and to joy, as the people worship the God who renews their life. In the season of Epiphany, Ezra reminds us that we too are recipients of divine instruction.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Rick Nutt

Christians, then, while denying the law or any system of works as a way to salvation, can embrace the law for the purposes it serves: restraining evil, convicting of sin, and aiding our understanding of God’s will. Because we know the law as gift from God, we understand that the entire law can be summarized positively as loving God and loving one’s neighbor. Christ becomes for us not the rejection or abrogation of the law but its telos, or fulfillment.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” W. Carter Lester

When we gather together as God’s people, when we are conscious of coming into the presence of the living and holy God, when we center our worship on God’s Word, when we offer all of ourselves to God, we cannot help but be changed over time. We gather to give glory to God and to have God make a difference in us so that we can be sent to make a difference in God’s world. When all of that happens, we have reason to follow the example of the people on this special day in Nehemiah 8 who ate and drank together and made “great rejoicing” (v. 12).

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Valerie Bridgeman Davis

The book of Nehemiah narrates Nehemiah’s return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and its wall. As King Artaxerxes’ cupbearer, Nehemiah receives news that the city is ruined. So the king releases him to help restore his homeland. Now it is time for the people to experience the word of God read and explained. Imagine. These ancient peoples have been so long away from their homeland. They may have heard the Law of Moses read in the shadow of Babylonian temples or even in synagogues. But here, in its native place, the Law looms large. And it needs an interpretative voice.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

***Nehemiah 8:1–3,
5–6, 8–10***

Focus on Your Teaching

How important is the Bible to your participants? Is it something they regularly read for guidance in living today? Some may see it as an outdated book with interesting stories. Others may put it on a pedestal constructed of reverence more than understanding. Today's text from Nehemiah provides an opportunity to discover the importance of both study and interpretation for people of faith as they open themselves not simply to understand Scripture, but to understand themselves in light of Scripture.

Help me, O God, to find in this session's ancient words of Scripture the very contemporary assurance of your call and purposes. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- biblical study resources (concordances, commentaries on Nehemiah, Bible dictionaries)
- board or newsprint
- markers
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for February 3, 2019

For Responding:

- option 1: Resource Sheet 1
- option 2: Resource Sheet 2
- option 3: paper, pens

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome adults and introduce any guests or visitors.

Form pairs and invite participants to think of a time when they thought they understood something—only to find out later they were wrong (For example: “where babies come from”). Then, encourage them to recall how they came to learn the correct understanding of the matter—and how that changed them, if at all.

Gather as a whole group and ask for a few volunteers to briefly report how their new understandings came about, and to what end.

Explain that today we will explore how one community in the Bible dealt with the importance of gaining greater understanding of Scripture through interpretation for the sake of following God.

Read aloud Psalm 19:1–4, 14 as a prayer of invocation.

EXPLORING

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10) and have a volunteer read the “Now What?” excerpt. Pay particular attention to the final sentence. Ask:

✿ Why did people need an “interpretive voice” to understand the Law of Moses?

Read Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10 aloud to the group, one verse at a time. After each verse, pause to allow adults to identify words or elements of the verse that are in need of interpretation—that is, something that stands in the way of understanding the story's meaning. For example, highlight that verse 2 mentions this taking place on “the first day of the seventh month”—which is, in the Jewish calendar, the first day of the year. Such a

detail, without interpretation, might go overlooked. Write what participants lift up on the board or newsprint.

The two verses in this passage omitted by the lectionary are lists of people present with and aiding Ezra in the interpretation of the Law. Consider including these lists when you divide up words (here, names) in need of interpretation.

When all verses have been read, divide up the list of words in need of further interpretation among the participants. Working individually or in pairs, have them use the biblical study resources provided, and such resources in their own Bibles, to seek information that would further the understanding of this passage.

Gather the group, and go through the information that has been generated, inviting discussion on how this information furthers our understanding of this passage in Nehemiah. Reread the passage. Ask adults to compare their understanding of the passage now than when it was first read.

Ask the participants to go through the passage and count the number of times in which “all” or “all the people” occurs. If it was not identified in the earlier “interpretive” activity, note that the Water Gate located this gathering at a place where “everyone could be present, even those who were ritually unclean.” Discuss:

- ✪ What are the implications of setting the reading of Scripture in this particular place and with such emphasis upon inclusivity?
- ✪ Who in that gathering might have found that emphasis to provide a source of joy, a source of renewal? Why?

The writer of the “So What?” excerpt began her extended commentary on this passage by affirming Nehemiah 8 to be a “picture in the Scriptures about how worship *actually* takes place.”

Note that some interpreters view this passage as an outline of ancient Jewish worship. Invite participants to identify elements of liturgy they see present in the text, especially any parallels to your congregation’s order of worship. Discuss:

- ✪ What is the central element of the worship that takes places in Nehemiah 8; why?

Silently read the “What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Invite comments on the two sentences begun by: “But that guide and path have not been sealed forever in concrete . . .”

- ✪ As recipients ourselves of divine instruction, how do we go about the task of interpreting Scripture so that we might better open ourselves to God’s renewal?

**EASY
PREP**

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

1. Gathering to the Word The Word read and interpreted stands at the foundation of Christian community. Read the “So What?” excerpt on Resource Sheet 1. Explore each of the four “when” clauses in the first sentence with these “springboards” to individual and congregational action:

- ✪ How might your congregational “gatherings” (not just Sunday worship) more intentionally seek renewal in the Word read and interpreted?
- ✪ What practices will you do this week, individually and with others, to open yourself to the presence of God?

- ✿ What does your congregation currently do—and what might it try doing—to center worship on God’s Word and its interpretation for this day in which we live?
- ✿ How do our gatherings, and worship in particular, engage the offerings of all of ourselves to God: our hearts, our wills, our intellects, our emotions?

2. **A Model and Practice for Biblical Interpretation** Group study of the Bible is best served by time spent in personal reading and preparation. Distribute Resource Sheet 2 (A Guide for Reading and Interpreting Scripture). Tell participants they are to use this model to explore Psalm 19 now. Allow adequate time for individuals to work through this. If adults wish to work together in pairs and trios, encourage that—so long as one does not become the “answer” person. Afterwards, gather the group. Go over each of the elements on the guide on the resource sheet. Affirm the diversity of views that may arise as part of how the Spirit works through the whole community rather than a limited few.
3. **The Joy of Community Renewal** Reading and interpreting the Word aims to renew the community with greater joy in God and in one another. Have adults turn to Psalm 19, which is one of today’s lections. Note that it is a song that joyfully celebrates God’s glory revealed not only in creation but in God’s Word (*torah*). Silently identify the joys that the psalmist employs in thanksgiving for God’s Word. Next, have each adult write a prayer of thanksgiving for God’s Word that speaks newly to us in each generation. Offer an opportunity at the end of this activity, or as part of Closing, for individuals to offer the prayers they have written.

CLOSING

Invite participants to offer brief comments about and questions raised by the discussions and activities of this session.

Recall the Gathering activity, and the changes resulting from having a previously wrong understanding corrected. Ask participants to silently recall a person or group who served in such an “interpretive” way in terms of deepening their understanding of the Bible, and the renewal they experienced through that.

Close with a sentence prayer that offers each individual the opportunity to thank the one(s) who were important in deepening their understanding of Scripture. Affirm that those uncomfortable with praying aloud need not do so, but encourage them to offer such prayer in silence. Begin the time of prayer yourself; and when it seems to have reached an end, lead the group in the Lord’s Prayer.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for February 3, 2019, or e-mail it to the participants early in the week, so that they have adequate time to reflect on the Scripture passages and the excerpts throughout the coming week.

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A Guide for Reading and Interpreting Scripture

The personal study of Scripture is an important prelude to gathering around the Word with others. (If you would like to see elements of this outline expanded in greater detail, see *A Pathway of Interpretation* by Walter Brueggemann.)

Read the passage

Whether it is something you have read many times before or have just come upon it, read the passage yourself before you consult any commentaries. Let the Word speak to you first.

Pay attention to its structure

Are there words or phrases repeated? Does it read like poetry or prose? What might the way the passage is organized tell you about what is at its core?

Consult commentaries, dictionaries, and/or biblical encyclopedias

Only after you have given the Word time to speak to you on its own, consult reliable resources. If you have access to a concordance that gives the Greek and Hebrew words, use that to take a deeper look at the structure and content of the passage. Who, and what, did the text address in its original setting—and why (that is, for what purpose)? What connections do you see between this passage and its ancient setting with life today?

Ask yourself the revelation questions

What does this passage reveal about God?
What does this passage reveal about the world?
What does this passage reveal about you?

