

Words Forming Witnesses

Stiff Necks and Sad Results

**Psalm 63:1-8 and Nehemiah 9:16-17
(188, 208, 207, 746)**

February 24, 2013

I've been fascinated this week
by the image of a person or a people having a "stiff neck."

What comes to mind for you?

For me, it was three things.

First, it was a stubbornness that led to a sense of superiority,
of being and knowing better than others.

Second, it was pain that radiated throughout the body,
a pain that severely restricted the ability to move.

And third, it was a lack of mobility that restricted perspective as well,
creating a very narrow field of vision through which to see the world.

In summary, then, stubborn, debilitated, narrow people.

If we are being honest, that picture applies to us all too often.

This text is talking about us.

It is a word of caution
and judgement, if we do not heed the caution.

Stubborn, debilitated, narrow people
live sad lives of continuing slavery,
entrapped in their sense of superiority,
restricted movement, and narrow field of vision.
They are arrogant, fearful, and blind.

The focus of our memory verses this week
is our relationship with God.

Nehemiah has led a remnant of Israel
back from exile to Jerusalem

to rebuild the temple and re-establish faithful ways of living.

These words are from their confession of sin and faith.

In that confession, they remember the whole history of their people with God –
from creation, through the covenant with Abraham,
through the trials of the Exodus.

Throughout, they admitted to their arrogance, fear, and blindness
and recognized that it led only to repeated slavery.

Listen again for the words of our memory text:

*But they and our ancestors acted presumptuously
and stiffened their necks and did not obey your commandments;
they refused to obey, and were not mindful
of the wonders that you performed among them;
but they stiffened their necks
and determined to return to slavery in Egypt.
But you are a God ready to forgive,
gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,
and you did not forsake them.*

Think now of the way you understand your relationship with God
and how that shapes your understanding of the witness and work of the church.

Does your arrogance, fear, and blindness
keep you from knowing the God being confessed in this passage?

It's an interesting image of God that emerges.
In face of this human failure,
you'd expect anger and condemnation.
That's an image of God that is all too common
in Christian thinking over the ages and around the world.
Conform to our understand of God's law,
and you will be saved.
Fail to conform, and you will be condemned to slavery and death.

But that is not the kind of God the people of Israel confess in this text.

This God is ready to forgive,
gracious and merciful,
and abounding in steadfast love.
This is a God who is slow to anger
and will not hold onto that anger long.
This is a God who will not forsake his people,
no matter how far they have wandered from his ways.

This is God who believes in the potential of his people.
He has created them in his own image, male and female.
Indeed, because we are all created in the image of God,
we are created for community,
because our God is a community
of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

The kind of arrogance, fear, and blindness
that the people of God confess in this passage
destroy community and potential and freedom.

Those are the sad results of stiff necks.
They are results that keep us from seeing God
as God really is.

We construct our own image of God
out of our arrogance, fear, and blindness,
then protect it with all of our energy,
keeping us enslaved to our own stubbornness and narrowness.

That's not what God wants or what God offers.
What God wants and offers is the freedom to flourish.
God created us for a purpose.
God patiently and lovingly calls us back to that purpose,
over and over again,
with a patience and persistence that astounds us.
I don't pretend to fully understand it.

I do find my whole body and being relaxed with joy
when I grasp ever more deeply what this amazing love of God
does in, and for, and with me.

I know the same is true for you.

Our arrogance is loosened by the massage of God's love.
Our fear is removed by the power of God's presence.
Our blindness is lifted by the light of God's grace.

We are truly freed to flourish
As God intended in the beginning
and as God made possible in Jesus Christ.

Now, there is a downside to this freedom.
There are sad results if we fail to use this freedom
to become humble, confident, and learning people
constantly coming into community with God and others
to worship, learn, and enjoy fellowship,
then go out into the world to serve.
If we choose, in our freedom, to remain arrogant, fearful, and blind,
we will remain in slavery to those things.
And that is a sad life.

But we can choose a joyful life,
rich in possibilities to witness and work for this loving God
revealed so powerfully in our text this morning.

The key here is to keep this God clearly in focus.
It is to let this God be who this God is.
It is to accept this God's love, this God's grace, this God's mercy,
and this God's constant forgiving presence in our lives.

When we do, our whole being relax
into the joy and contentment
that come from being God's beloved children and friends.
We are freed from the tension and stiffness
that restricts our vision and movement.
We are freed to witness to the grace of Jesus Christ
by being a blessing in everything that we do.

In so many dimensions of our lives,
we exist in between constriction and freedom.
God offers freedom.
We settle for constriction.
And that is sad.

There are strong echoes here of final stages of the Exodus
recorded in Deuteronomy 30.
God's fidelity again is affirmed
and the choice is posed.
God sets before us life and death,
blessings and curses.
"Choose life," says God,
"so that you and your descendants may live,
loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast for him
For that means life for you ..." (Deut 30:19b-20a)

*And remember, the Holy Spirit forms in us the confidence
to flourish in our witness to the grace of Jesus Christ
in every dimension of our lives.*

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