

Good morning. It is good to see you all. I was with you a little more than two years ago back in March 2024 and at that time my wife Rachel and I had both of our children in the house and now both of them are in college. Our daughter is a junior at St. Andrews in Scotland. So she lives in Scotland year-round and our son is a first year student at Ithaca College in upstate New York. I say all of that just as a preface to a bit of pastoral privilege if you don't mind. Normally I don't get to travel with my wife. This is our first kind of trip as empty nesters. She had this week off from teaching and I preached in Myrtle Beach last Sunday. So we drove all the way down there and then you are a stop back on the way up. My goodness, it is a joy to be with you but to be together and also bring greetings from the Seminary. I go to about 40 churches every year: about three Sundays out of every month I am preaching somewhere around the country. I rarely get to go to a church that actually founded the Seminary! This is a unique relationship and I want to say again thank you to the ancestors who made a decision back in 1853 to create a seminary to train pastoral leaders in this community. That's the reason we're still here and I'm not overplaying that. I am so thankful and it is a joy to come back – and I get to dress up fancy. This is my grandmother's kilt, and this is my great-grandfather's tartan. I am exceptionally Scottish and so when Sean asked, "Would you be willing to play the pipes?", my goodness, I never say no to that. I am what you would call, though, a hack. I'm not a very good bagpiper, but I'm good enough. As my brother says, "You can play Amazing Grace and that other one." Now, I also want to just quickly say before getting to the scripture that my doctorate is actually in the Scottish Reformation, in the sacraments in particular. I love talking about how the church that we currently inhabit became what it is. However, it is sometimes difficult for us to look back and say that all the things we did were right or all the things we did were wrong. These were flawed people who were sinful like you and me. They had an idea. They tried, and we are continuing to reform and make sense of it. I'm very proud of the lineage that we have seen before us and that we inherit as Presbyterians, but we are but one flavor within this marvelous, marvelous bouquet of smells and sounds and sights that is the Church. So, let us be thankful today for the Reformation, but let us also give thanks for our sisters and brothers who are Catholic, Orthodox, Methodist, Baptist, and everything else in between.

Of the two texts this morning, I am focusing on Nehemiah. I'm going to begin with a wee bit of history about Nehemiah. The professor in me can't help it. Then I'll read the passage, because I think that helps to understand the passage just a little bit more. There are a lot of names in this particular reading! It is a point in history for the people of Israel that while it may be well known to some is not always as well known in our Christian church. So, with that in mind, I'm going to open us in prayer, give a little bit of background, get to the scripture, and I promise then we will talk about Scotland at some point. Let us pray:

Gracious and almighty God, it is a joy to worship, but to do so in community is truly a blessing that you have given to us. Help us then celebrate the voices that we hear around us, the children, those folks who are gathered here and bringing with them all that they are. Let's remember that some come here weeping, some come laughing, and yet you are with us all providing comfort and providing thanksgiving for us to offer back to you.

May your Holy Spirit bless the words that we hear and help us be inspired to do what you would have us do. Amen.

Now, the Old Testament book of Nehemiah was actually one book, Nehemiah and Ezra. You'll see that in the Old Testament right before the Psalms, and it covers this restoration period for the history of Israel. Very quick review. I promise there's no test afterwards. And because we are near the wonderful Centre College, I fear that there may be a history, Bible, or language professor in the room. If you are here, why don't you scroll on your phone a little bit and just ignore everything I'm going to say. I do not need that critique afterwards! The period of the monarchy is a time when Israel is united, both northern and southern kingdoms, but it does not last. The northern kingdom is conquered first by the Assyrians. and there's a lot of reasons that they split. But understand, the north gets conquered. The south is hanging on by a thread. The dates I know are important, but we're just going to kind of breeze over them and say it's a few generations. During that time period, the Assyrians, the Medes, the Persians, everybody wants a piece of this land that the Israelites are on. And eventually the Persians do take over. We have different names for them, but understand the southern kingdom falls. And what happens in that time period is, when you conquer a kingdom, you take the best of that kingdom with you and bring it back to your home. So imagine for instance, Louisville comes down here and says, "We are attacking Danville." And at the end of the battle, Louisville says, "We want all of your professors. We want all of the people who are the smartest in the room. And we want the people who are the most good-looking. We want those who are between about 20 years old and 40 years old. We don't want anyone who's past their prime. And we don't want any kids to take care of. And they grab them and bring them back with them to Louisville. And they take advantage of all those skills and beauty and all of the youthfulness. What's left behind are people that do not have those middle years in order to create, to protect, and to teach. So the folks who are left behind in the southern kingdom become the Samaritans. They are not quite sure about the faith that's been passed down to them. They corrupt the scripture a little bit. They create stories that are close but not exactly right. and they are not the same as they were when they were prosperous as the southern kingdom. Fast forward another many, many decades. And at some point, the Assyrians say, "It'd be nice if we had a trading post back in that old southern kingdom of Israel." And so they look around and say, "Nehemiah, go back and you're welcome to rebuild a town where your family is from." He says, "I'd like to do that, but also could I bring with me the law, the scripture that we used to have, and could I rebuild the temple?" The king of the Persians doesn't really seem to care if that keeps a trading route open. "Absolutely. Go back, knock yourselves out. And that's what happens. Nehemiah goes back and in this passage in particular that I'm about to read from chapter 8, we have the reading of the law for the first time for all the people who come back. And they are so overwhelmed by the scripture that people weep, they start dancing. Some hide their faces because they're ashamed. Some are overwhelmed and thinking, "My goodness, we have wanted this for so long." It is incredible to picture. And I always use this joke with my students that I'm training and helping become new pastors. Do not expect when you

read scripture on Sunday morning that people will respond this way! It would be nice, but this is wholly unique. The people are overwhelmed by a return to what they had before.

From Nehemiah: "All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra, the teacher of the law to bring out the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel. So the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest, brought the law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women, and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men and the women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the book of the law. Ezra, the teacher of the law, stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him stood," and forgive me folks, I am not going to read all of the names that are in there, but there are a lot of people standing at his right. He then opens the book. "All the people could see him because he was standing up high. And as he opened it, all the people stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God. And the people lifted up their hands. They said, "Amen." They bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. The Levites, those are the priests, they instructed the people of the law. While the people were standing there, they read from the book of the law, making it clear and giving meaning so that people understood what was being read. Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the law and the Levites were instructing the people said to them, "This day is holy. Do not mourn or weep." But all the people have been weeping as they listened to the word of the law. Nehemiah said, "Go enjoy choice foods and sweet drinks. Send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve. The joy of the Lord is your strength."

It's a great, great story of the Old Testament. Now, I'm going to fast forward a few thousand years. I am Scottish. While I was born in Michigan, my family is from Michigan and Canada. We are almost all Scots and we have a lot of pride in our Scottishness. I mentioned my daughter who's gone back to Scotland to study and she is loving it there. It feels something special to go back to a place. I know I didn't really leave Scotland but my family left Scotland. I have a very dear friend, the Reverend Dr. Rory MacLeod from the Isle of Skye. He served as the Presbyter for the Isle of Lewis in the Kirk of Scotland. Now, Rory and I did our doctorate together. And what I found to be so interesting, he is as Scottish as they come. He plays the bag pipes. He was a chaplain for the Queen's Royal Marines. He had so many good stories of his Scottish heritage, but he shared that his family actually moved to Scotland. You see, his parents are Australian, his grandparents were Australian, his great-grandparents, and so forth. And yet his father at some point made the decision that "we need to return to Scotland." Like many probably in this room, there are Scots everywhere. There are more Scots outside of Scotland than there are in Scotland – people with Scottish heritage and backgrounds. Scotland today has a smaller population than it did in the 1700s, which is always interesting to share with people, because folks like to go to Scotland and take pictures of a beautiful landscape, empty fields and moors and you have all of that peat and you'll see scattered around the remnants of little crofters' cabins or sometimes four

stone walls of a church but no roof. And while they look like wonderful postcard settings, they are reminders of what used to be. Scotland after the battle of Culloden went through a time called "the clearances" when wealthy land owners came to the north and ostensibly kicked out all of those poor crofters through economic pressure. Some were told to leave because of petty crimes that were made up, or real. But most people simply ran out of money, ran out of resources, and didn't know where else to go. And the English government said, "Well, we can send you to New Zealand, Australia, to the States, to Canada." And that's how many of us ended up far away from Scotland. Scotland is a pale shell of what it was before the clearances. And yet you can see what it was. I love the romance of Rory's father deciding to return, because that's not really the norm. And there's something to be said about feeling your roots and wanting to go back to that place. Now, I like old stories and I like history and I certainly love scripture that reminds us of these same stories. But I have to ask myself, why do I want to know about the past? Why do some of us long for what was, even if we didn't actually experience it ourselves? What do we hope will return? For Nehemiah, there was this intense desire to have the people of God return and Ezra the priest to lead them once again in the ways of the ancestors, to go back to Moses and the prophets, and to have God's instructions and teachings made wholesome and joyful for all of the community. I like to dwell in past successes, and I enjoy the glory of days gone by, but what I like about this passage is that it's not celebrating some victory or battle. It still remembers that they were conquered and that they were not faithful, that they broke God's commandments, that they had the gift of the law and they did not follow it. There's an audacity to this of being reminded: "Here are all of the things that we did not do correctly. Praise be to God. There is another chance." And they stand up and they cheer on the scriptures. Practically speaking, we here in Danville and across the Presbyterian Church USA, are able to worship, fellowship, learn, and study today because brave women and men, saints of the church who now rest from their labors, were willing to do something to keep the scripture alive, to keep gathering together to create seminaries and schools like Center College, to be of people who said there's something important about saving what we have for the next generation, not just for ourselves. And how do we do this faithfully?

My favorite Reformation character is John Knox. You'll see an awful lot of things named after Knox. He was a Catholic priest born in the very early 1500s in Scotland. Now, the people in pre-reformation Scotland were Catholic, but also a mix of some local experiences and legends of what we would now look at and say, maybe some Celtic spirituality. It was a blending, but it was also unclear. And the Catholic Church was trying to be very rigid and dogmatic about what could be allowed and what could not be allowed. As a young man, Knox heard another reformer named George Weissheart. And he heard this preacher get up and say, "We need to make this simple. We need to retell the story of our faith. We need to see Jesus alive here now, and we need all the people to embrace the story and share it with one another." And Knox loved it. Knox was just enamored by Weissheart. His teaching was incredible. Weissheart was also, though, a criminal, because the Catholic Church and the Crown said he was just a rabble rouser. He was in the town of St. Andrews where my

daughter now is in school. And just as a point of reference of how old that school was. We're in the 1500s right now and they had celebrated their 120th anniversary already at that school. The past is alive everywhere they go. In 1547, French warships came up along the coast there in St. Andrews, and the folks who were the wannabe reformers could not hold out. They were either killed or taken into prison, or, like Knox, pressed into service. He was required to row French warships for three years. A rough, rough punishment. When he is finished with his time of service, he's told, "You're free, but you cannot go back to Scotland. You can do anything else you want to do, but you can't go back there."

Knox goes to Geneva, where he meets John Calvin, another reformer, and he learns about Calvin's interpretations of all these new reformed ideas. He falls in love with it, but he can't help himself. He says, "I just wish I could share this message back in Scotland. I wish I could go back and tell the people what I've seen and what I've learned and what God is doing in this world." Well, Knox, like any good Scotsman, breaks the law, welcomes the opportunity to go back and gets to St. Andrews again and preaches. There is an Englishman at the time, John Randolph, who said, "One sermon by Knox is louder than 5,000 trumpets and far more dangerous." I love that imagery. Knox gets up and he preaches by reading scripture and saying, "This is what Jesus Christ is calling us to do." I'd like to say it's more complicated, but it truly is that. It's almost like going back to Ezra. It's reading the word of God to the people and then saying, "What is God calling us to do right now?" I would like to say that in my faith, I am that bold. I would like to say that my sermons and teaching make that type of an impact. There's certainly ego involved in that. But more importantly, I don't know that I'm willing to put my life on the line like some of these folks were in the early days. You see, I'm convinced during times of great strife, we generally see folks respond in three ways. One, they want to change the whole thing. Ten to 20 percent of folks are these sort of revolutionaries. They'll lay it all on the line. They will absolutely risk everything they have to bring about what they think needs to happen. Then another 10 to 20 percent are the folks who say, "No, we have to keep what we have" and likewise they are willing to fight and they're willing to go to war with these people on the other side. I'm convinced though that largely there's about 50 to 60 percent of the people (and I would count myself in that probably) who recognize injustice, who could point out and say "That's probably the wrong way to do things. And I can also see why folks want to save things over here, but you know, I've got a lot of other things going on right now," and they stand back. The church is where it is right now because people were willing to stand up and say, "This is not correct. This is not the way God has called us to worship, to fellowship, to share the good news." People willing to risk everything they have, to be inconvenienced even in the midst of what God has given us, to say, "Yes, it is easy. stand aside and simply embrace this particular moment." Hope someone else will say the thing, do the thing, make it happen. But it takes, I think, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for us to stand back and say, "I'm willing to try something different because God has called me to that thing." Folks, the disciples couldn't even do this. Well after Jesus's death, they couldn't even rally themselves to go off and change the world around them. We are not expected to be superhuman but we are promised the Holy

Spirit is with us and the promise of the Reformation is the ongoing work of it, the reformed being always reformed, a work of the Holy Spirit in this place that is telling us to look around and say "What are we asked to do now? How is that different from before?" Either reclaiming what we had or starting something new. My friend Rory tells the story of going back to Scotland and I couldn't help the first time to hear it say, "Oh my goodness, that is just beautiful. What was it like?" He says, "Oh, it was terrible. I was an Australian boy who was raised in Australia, who goes to this wet, kind of damp, ugly country that's always gray. I was from the sunny beaches of Sydney. And it wasn't what I thought it would be. In fact, the people treated me like an outsider. I wasn't one of them right away. And it sort of broke my romantic vision." I said, "Well, how did you get through it?" He said, "A lot of therapy. Blaming my parents for moving us when we were young." But in reality, it's not that easy. And he didn't go back to the thing that generations before had left. Remember, Scotland does not look the same as it did in 1750s. Praise be to God. There are a lot of good things there that they didn't have at that time. I am an odd mix of that conservative and progressive and I acknowledge that, not just politically. I like holding on to things from the past, but they're not always better. And I like new things, but maybe they should be influenced by what we had before. The Reformation is all about that. We are recognizing what we have been given. We are saying, "How can it be a little bit different today, and how is God continuing to call us?" I'll end with this. Churches in particular, but seminaries also, are generally founded in a particular time, in a particular place, for a particular reason. At some point here in Danville, some folks got together and said, "We need to have a Presbyterian church," and they were willing to be inconvenienced to do it. And they were answering a need at that time here in this place. The Seminary is the same way. 73 years ago, someone said, "We don't have a seminary nearby. We need to train some preachers in Reformed heritage." You have continued throughout the many decades from the founding to this place now. I do not believe the same needs are here now, but there are needs. What is it this particular community is looking for? What is your role within that? How can you reform and be reformed always as you are looking for ways to share the gospel, to be the hands and feet of Christ, to help people know that they are loved and they are accepted. This is a beautiful church. And also, I want to put you on the spot. Because the idea of someone getting up and talking about the idea of their joy within a congregation? I want to bottle that up. There are plenty of churches out there in our community right now who are not feeling that same sense of warmth and hope. They need to be inspired by you. You need to be loud. You need to be out there talking about what the gospel has done in this place. About how it calls you to welcome young people and those who are not so young. About how it brings you together in this particular community at this particular time. about how the gifts that you have in this place are able to bring about the kingdom of God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, and how you're proclaiming the same Jesus Christ that your founders proclaimed who lived, died, is resurrected and promises to return to us again. Folks, that's the good news of the Reformation, and that's the restoration that we're all looking for. May you continue to do God's work in this place, and thank you. Thank you for being an inspiration within the body of Christ. Amen.