Before I get to the point of today’s sermon, we need to have some background on the Babylonian captivity (how many times do you get to say that). The quick version is that in the year 586 BC following the defeat of the Jewish people’s in the Jewish–Babylonian War and the destruction of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, a large number of the Jewish people, from the Kingdom of Judah, were taken captive and moved to Babylon, the capital city of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Forty-eight years later, in the year 538 BC, Cyrus the Great granted permission for them to return home, which many did. Upon returning the Temple was rebuilt and later Ezra, the guy we hear about today, comes back with a group of exiles and finds that there is still a lot of work to be done. The people have not been living according to the will of God, doing such things as intermarrying with the locals and dabbling in a little religious pluralism. This is sort of where we pick up the story today in our reading from Nehemiah. So that we get it from the horse’s mouth let me read a little. “All the people of Israel gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding.… He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday…And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people… and all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen,’ lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.” It is an amazing tale of returning. Not only have the people of Israel returned to their geographic homeland but that have now returned to their spiritual homeland. They have collectively decided to repent and return to the Lord. They have decided to follow God and his law rather the devices and desires of their own hearts. And the cycle that we see here in microcosm is one that is repeated throughout history. And I am not talking about being conquered and hauled off into captivity but rather about the story of sin and repentance. The Jewish people had lost their way and are now seeing the error of their ways and changing. And while it is not always obvious there seems to be a pendulum that swings back and forth in any given society. People go from ignoring God and his laws to walking in his will and delighting in his ways and all places in-between.

I once heard an interview with a person who had studied the Great Awakening (or more correctly Great Awakenings) in the United States; that is those periods in American history where there was a dramatic revival in American Christianity. The person doing the interview asked, based on the way things seemed to be going currently, if we were due for another great awakening type of event. To my surprise the expert’s response was that we would have to get a whole lot less religious first. He pointed out that levels of Christian devotion proceeding many of the episodes known as Great Awakenings was in sorrier shape than they are today. I don’t know if that is good news or bad news but what I know it suggests that all is not lost. It tells us that the direction society is headed in does not necessarily stay that way. Or put in investment prospectus terms past performance is not indicative of future results. There are times and places where society seemed to be going one way and in a very short period of time turned and went in a different direction.

But, besides telling us that it can happen, today’s passage also tells us that we are not in control of when and how it happens. In other words, we cannot dictate the time in which society will hear the reading of the law and bow their heads to worship the Lord. And this may be disappointing because as humans we like to think that with the right vote or make a donation to the right advocacy group, we can change the path of society. But as someone who can’t even persuade anyone in my family to get the Cajun seasoning on the fries at Five Guys, I am not sure I can change the course of human civilization.

In the 1950’s William F. Buckley popularized the phrase, “Don't immanentize the eschaton!" He borrowed this phrase from the German-American political philosopher Eric Voegelin. What this phrase basically means is do not try and bring out heaven on earth through political means. There is more to it than this but what I think Buckley was getting at was that when we try to use political forces to implement our idea of perfection on earth really bad things happen. You can think of anything to year zero in Cambodia which lead to the killing fields to China’s great leap forward which resulted in the deaths of at least fifty million people. But I also bring this up as a bit of a warning to us as Christians who look out at the world and wonder what it would take to make this country and the world more thoroughly Christian. I certainly agree with the sentiment. I would love to see churches full on Sunday and for youth sports to take place on Saturday in the way God intended for them to be. But the question is how do we go about this? Do we bring back blue laws? Do we go all Francisco Franco and institute National Catholicism? No, the problem seems to be is that we cannot, through our own will, make this change happen. We cannot turn the monkey paw in the right direction and make the things that occur in our reading occur in our society today. But that does not mean that we cannot do something.

One of the themes you have probably picked up on in my sermons is the idea to focus on the things that we can control. In other words, none of us are probably going to be influential over vast swathes of people. But we will have influence over some. And so, while it would be great if we saw a return to the church and to God’s sovereignty among our society, we cannot do much about that, but we can do something where we live. Both by influencing others but more importantly by living lives that are glorifying to God. I know that it is more fun to tell other people to change or at least lament that society is full of problems, but that does not really do much.

I was listening to some the other day talk about strategies to manage stress. He said that one thing we can do is that when we are confronted with a stressful situation is to step back for a minute and do an inventory. In such situations he said that we need to analyze the situation and ask what are the things that we can do something about and what are the things over which we have no control. I don’t know how well it works to control stress, but I do not that it is reasonable advice. We need to work on the things which we can actually work on and leave to God the things that he can actually work on. You notice in today’s story there was no line which said anything about Ezra persuading the people to obey God. He simply read the law. He did what he could do and God did the rest. We do not know when things will change in our society or in the world, but we do know that there are things we can be doing to glorify God. And, like Ezra today, we never know when one of these seemingly small things might change a life or even a society. We are called to work with God, not to be God. Which is kind of nice. We can work on what we can work on so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.