

Bible Tuesday for Epiphany 3, 2019

Nehemiah 8:1-10

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.

² So on 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. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

⁴ Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uria, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

⁵ Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

⁷ The Levites—Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah—instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear^[a] and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

¹⁰ Nehemiah 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."

In this passage from Nehemiah, the Israelites have returned from exile in Babylonia to Canaan and rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. They have dedicated the Temple and now, in this passage, they are about to dedicate themselves.

Nehemiah is an Israelite whom Cyrus of Persia, the king who defeated the Babylonian Empire, appointed as governor of Israel in his name. Ezra is the high priest of Israel. Ezra has called all the people of Jerusalem and the surrounding area together to hear the "Book of the Law". Ezra and Nehemiah have gathered representatives of each of the 12 tribes of Israel onto the dais with Ezra. Just as Moses was given the law on Mount Sinai which he then gave to the Israelites, Ezra now reads from above the people the Law of Moses. Note that the people all stand to hear the Law of Moses. This act began the tradition among the Jews to stand in worship when hearing the Torah. That tradition transitioned to Christians standing for the Gospel reading.

In addition to have twelve heads of the tribes of Israel around him, Ezra also had twelve priestly assistants and the Levites who went among the people to explain the Law of Moses to the people. This text makes clear how important it was that every man and woman hearing the reading must understand it before they dedicate themselves to it.

As the people hear the Law, they react with weeping. Are they feeling convicted of their failure to keep this Law heretofore? Are they afraid of the intricacies of keeping the Law? Are they grieving their exilic suffering in Babylonia and the trip home? Whatever the reasons, Ezra adjures them to set aside their tears and celebrate God's love for them which has brought them to this auspicious day.

Water Gate: The Water Gate is one of the gates in the wall around the city of Jerusalem. It is opposite the Temple.

"Seventh month, first day" – This event is the inaugural event of Rosh Ha-Shannah, the first day of the New Year.

Psalm 19

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament^[a] proclaims his handiwork.

² Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.

³ There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;

⁴ yet their voice^[b] goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens^[c] he has set a tent for the sun,

⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

⁶ Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.

⁷ The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;

the decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple;

⁸ the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;

the commandment of the Lord is clear,
enlightening the eyes;

⁹ the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever;

the ordinances of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.

¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.
¹¹ Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
¹² But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.
¹³ Keep back your servant also from the insolent,^[d]
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.
¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

This psalm is part of the prescribed liturgy for Jewish Saturday morning Sabbath services as well as some holiday services. Here the psalmist begins with illustrations of how creation reflects God's creativity and sings praises to God. Next, the psalmist introduces a common theme: praise of the Law of God. The Law is seen not merely as a code of conduct or even simply as a system of worship of God. Rather, the psalmist describes the Law as the path of relationship with God, the method whereby one stays right with God.

1 Corinthians 12:12-21

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.
¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

Thank you, God, for Paul and his imagery of the body of Christ! Throughout the history of the church, from Paul's time through our own, the church has struggled with factions, all too human leaders, egos, heresies, dogma, doctrines, and traditions. In each of these conflicts, our extreme reactions are to damn those who disagree with us and schism. In this passage, St. Paul, and Jesus through St. Paul, urges the faithful to recognize each other's roles in the community of faith and strive to work together for Christ.

Luke 4:14-21

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

"Then Jesus,..." – What comes just before this passage? The temptation in the wilderness. In Luke's telling of the temptation, the devil tempts Jesus with food, power, and manipulation of God. When the devil finds he is unsuccessful, he leaves Jesus for "a more opportune time." No more ominous phrase appears in the gospels!

Luke tells us that Jesus is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus at his baptism. Was the Holy Spirit not with Jesus in the wilderness? While the gospel of John has Jesus do much of his ministry in and around Jerusalem, the synoptic gospels have Jesus up in Galilee for much of his ministry, most of that in Capernaum.

Jesus functions like an itinerate rabbi, traveling from town to town, guest preaching at the local synagogues on the sabbath. Itinerate rabbis were common in Jesus' time, generally gathering disciples around them who would travel with him. This passage gives us a glimpse into sabbath worship practices. The guest rabbi stands when it is time for the scripture reading. From this passage, it seems that the guest rabbi does not select his own text to read but that a scroll is given him. However, it appears Jesus was able to select what passage of Isaiah he was allowed to read. As scrolls were quite costly or very time consuming to create, and since Nazareth was a small farming town with no more than 400 people in Jesus' day, the synagogue may have only have a handful of scrolls.

Jesus read this famous passage from Isaiah, proclaiming that the Holy Spirit is upon him. That may seem almost mundane to us since we believe that the Holy Spirit is working on or dwelling within everyone. This is because Jesus gives the Holy Spirit to all disciples after his resurrection,

and the baptized receive the Holy Spirit in baptism in the name of the Trinity thereafter. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Holy Spirit is bestowed very rarely and only on certain individuals: those who are anointed as prophets or kings. It is far more common for individuals to receive communication from God through visions or angel visits than to receive the Holy Spirit.

The Isaiah passage explains what the Spirit of the Lord does when it is upon someone. It anoints them to preach, teach, proclaim good news, and perpetrate good news on those to whom good news does not usually apply. Jesus declares to the hometown crowd that this all important prophecy written 700 years earlier is pointing down through the centuries to...him. Jesus is filled by God with the Holy Spirit, not to march on Jerusalem and retake the kingdom of Israel from the Romans, not to reinstate some Davidic era of prosperity and Jewish power, but to bring God's word and will to those who desperately need it.

Poverty, blindness, and disease of any sort was believed to be God's curse upon the wicked. Why are people poor? Because they don't work hard enough and they squander their money, and they... Why are people blind? Because they committed crimes and had their eyes gauged out as punishment or because they sinned and God cursed them. Why are people imprisoned? Because they sinned against God or against their own people and were caught. To these people God sends a messenger filled with the Holy Spirit. To these people God sends the gospel, the good news.

When the people of Nazareth look at Jesus, they see the carpenter's oldest son. While carpenters are solidly middle class folks with admired skills in our culture, in Jesus' culture, they are one step above homeless people and beggars. Jesus' status in Jewish culture was negligible. The fact that he fancied himself an itinerate preacher was uppity all by itself. But now he was proclaiming that the prophecy of Isaiah was written about him! Jaws dropped and tempers exploded.