

Sunday, January 23, 2022 – “Powerful Word”

– Bible Study & Reflection on Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 & Luke 4:14-21

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passages from Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 (*New Revised Standard Version*) & Luke 4:14-21 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

¹ All the people 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. ² Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³ He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, 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. ⁸ So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

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.”

To put this Sunday’s Gospel Reading in context, Jesus has just been tempted by Satan in the wilderness. He resists Satan’s tempting offers. The first place that Luke takes Jesus is to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. The first time we see Jesus in action, Jesus is reading from the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah, and then he interprets the words of scripture and it

becomes his first sermon. Jesus reading scripture and preaching scripture are the first ways we meet Jesus in his public ministry according to Luke's Gospel.

Note that Jesus comes to Nazareth in the power of the Spirit. He had actually been strengthened by the experience of his encounter with evil. He has gone to Galilee, showing Jesus' determination, at the very beginning, to reach out even to the Gentiles (those outside the Jewish faith). Now he comes back to his own in his own hometown. And what does the Spirit empower Jesus to do? To preach God's Word. The Spirit brings God's Word to speech.

As a preacher, this is my assumption every time I prepare a reflection/sermon. There are many places we might turn to have our world explained, to figure out what to do: Wikipedia, The View, the Democrat & Chronicle, Shirley in the next cubicle, tarot cards, Fox News, CNN, mom or dad, the church, the state, our gut instincts. But as a person of faith and a preacher, I turn to the scriptures and try to discern (interpret) how the Holy Spirit is speaking to us at the present moment. That's why reading scripture in worship services is so important.

By opening worship with a scripture reading, Luke shows us that Jesus is a faithful Jew. "He went to the synagogue (read church or house of worship) on the sabbath, as was his custom." Jesus stands up to read (God forbid that Congregationalists would ever stand for the Gospel Reading). The reading as given by Luke appears to be a conflation of the Servant Songs from Isaiah 58:6 and Isaiah 61:1-2. This is the "good news" that Jesus preaches. A passage from scripture that had meaning in its original context, presumably a different series of circumstances experienced by the prophet Isaiah's disciples, is now given fresh, relevant meaning for the local folk at the synagogue at Nazareth. The ancient Word of God is thus contemporized, made relevant, by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Right before the Pilgrims set sail on the Mayflower for the New World, their beloved pastor and teacher, John Robinson preached to them. Pastor Robinson told them not to stay stuck where Luther and Calvin had left them "... for God has yet more light and truth to break forth from God's Word."

The text Jesus read is an announcement. Messianic deliverance is coming. The world will be turned upside down as God reverses the fortunes of Israel. To announce the change is to initiate the change. In other words, words matter, words have power. God's Word is powerful. That's why whenever a pastor preaches on the latest email forward or Facebook meme instead of basing a sermon on scripture, the sermon falls flat. It's why the whole church hasn't reorganized itself around those angelic dreams some church member keeps telling everyone about. Jesus embodies the advent of the new age. Three times the first-person singular pronoun is used in verse 18, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon **me** . . . he has anointed **me** . . . He has sent **me** . . .," as if to underscore that the preacher, Jesus, is not only speaking about the new age but is himself the embodiment of the new age.

This Sunday's Gospel is wonderfully paired with Nehemiah and the account of the return of the exiles and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. God's people are vulnerable without a protective wall. During the rebuilding of the wall, a scroll is found. The population gathers for a public reading of the rediscovered Word. When these words, long lost to God's people, are read, the people rejoice, and they engage in repentance, turning their lives around to the ways

of God. They rejoice that they are again being sustained by God's Word; they repent because they have wandered astray, having been so long bereft of God's Word.

The people were in the process of rebuilding a protective wall of stone. And yet, in the discovery of the scroll, perhaps they are reminded that God's people survive and are sustained through the power of God's Word. Here we are at the core of our faith, the dynamic that maintains God's people as God's people – not a structure or a building, but the powerful Word of God being interpreted in the midst of the people as they worship.

Taken together, this Sunday's lessons from the First Testament and the Gospel Testament provide a wonderful opportunity for reflection upon the gift of God's Word, read and preached. It will be my task to be open to the Spirit as I preach these texts from God's Word; it will be all of our tasks to embody them in our daily living.

Faithfully Yours in Christ,

Pastor Greg Rupright