

Some lessons from the Watergate

3 Epiphany C

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

The exiles have returned & rebuilt Jerusalem. Now Ezra, the priest, reads the law of Moses to them in the public square. When they hear it, they weep for their sins & for the long years in exile, but Ezra reminds them that “the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

[When the seventh month came—the people of Israel being settled in their towns—] ¹all 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. ²Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men & women & all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³Ezra read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men & the women & those who could understand; & the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁵& Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; & when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, & all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads & worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. ⁸So the Levites read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹& Nehemiah, who was the governor, & Ezra the priest & scribe, & 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. ¹⁰Then Ezra said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat & drink sweet wine & send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; & do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Gospel: Luke 4:14-21

Near the start of Jesus’ public ministry, he visits his hometown. In the words of Isaiah, he states & claims his identity, purpose, & mission.

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, & a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues & was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When Jesus 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& the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He

unrolled the scroll & found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to proclaim release to the captives & recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰& Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, & sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Introduction

God’s glory is revealed in reading scripture. People stand up. People weep. People set themselves in prayer. Church unity is another reflection of God’s glory. Most gloriously, the promises of God are fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. Gather round. Listen up. Glimpse the glory of God.

Overview

Playgrounds still resound with “sticks & stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” But those words ring hollow. As adults, & as children, we know only too well the power of words to do harm. In contrast, the scriptures for today point us to the word that bears hope, promise, & life. Human words can hurt or fail, but now we hear this holy word of wisdom, challenge, instruction, & hope that really does form us in God’s promise. Rather than words that tear down, we are invited by the prophets & Jesus into God’s living words with & among friends. Jesus, in coming home & attending the synagogue, reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus announces good news to those struggling economically on the fringes of society, hope to those who are imprisoned, healing to those without sight, a lifting of the burden from those who are weighed down or oppressed, & even the in-breaking of a holy year of favor. Standing in a tradition of prophets & priests who speak, engage, & teach God’s word, Jesus now offers one thing more—fulfillment. The words of those who dream & hope, who work for justice & mercy on behalf of God, are now true. This Word counters sticks & stones & all that oppresses; Jesus address announces God’s liberating actions. This Word sounds promise to all who hear; it is an invitation to see God at work among God’s people.

Theological Reflection

In today’s gospel, Jesus proclaims the year of the Lord’s favor & describes how such a time is recognized. Each time we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we ask for God’s kingdom to come & God’s will to be done on earth as in heaven. In the Large Catechism, Martin Luther explains that we are praying “that all this may be realized in us & that his name

may be praised through God's holy Word & Christian living" (*The Book of Concord*, Kolb & Wengert, eds. [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000], p. 447).

Pop Culture

The film *Chicken Run* (DreamWorks, 2000) is about chickens who plan & make a great escape. In convincing her fellow farmyard fowl to make this escape, Ginger finds that her friends lack imagination about the possible. When Babs rejects Ginger's ideas, the latter exclaims, "The fences aren't just around the farm, they're up here" as she points to her head. In a truth that goes beyond the coop, Ginger illuminates a reality of the human condition. The limitations on freedom, mercy, justice, peace, & healing are most often in our minds. Jesus' life, teaching, & resurrection not only removes the false barriers of the world for our spiritual freedom; they also removed the fences we have erected in our minds.

[Luke 4:14-21](#)

Recurrent emphases in Luke are the power of God's Spirit in Jesus & the availability of the good news of forgiveness for the whole world. Jesus has been tempted by the devil in the wilderness (vv. [1-13](#)) to misuse his power for his personal benefit, for worldly domination, & for protection from God's plan fulfilled on the cross. Now he returns to Galilee. Jesus customarily attends synagogue services to worship & present his message; it is there that Luke tells us who Jesus is: he stands in continuity with God's promises of old. Jesus is a great teacher; he has great authority in telling people about God & his plan. Jesus begins with one part of the scroll (Isaiah [61](#)), then *rewinds* to another: vv. [18-19](#) emphasize his mission to those who are "poor" in any way, be it financially, in spirit, in health. In "the year of the Lord's favor", the jubilee year, debts were forgiven & slaves were set free. Jesus applies these verses to himself: he performs the works of the Messiah then expected. He then sits to interpret the readings: he says that God's plan is now being completed ("fulfilled", v. [21](#)). Luke says that Jesus, filled with the Spirit, preaches that he himself is the fulfillment of historic hopes for the social transformation & physical healing that the messiah will bring. We on Sunday morning still hear Jesus speaking through the word, & we are to join him in proclaiming God's good favor to all, experiencing this healing, & enacting social transformation. Perhaps what Jesus has said will provoke a strong response among many today. Good news to the poor & the "year of the Lord's favor" sound great until we get into the nitty-gritty of what that means. The idea of a radical redistribution of property & wealth will not sound like good news to many of us who live comfortable lives & do not want to give up what we have. The idea of welcoming certain groups of people into our communities will be unsettling for some. Still Jesus proclaims that **today** this scripture is fulfilled in him. Projecting this vision into a distant future is

no longer possible. Jesus will demonstrate this fulfillment concretely in his healing, liberation, & welcome for all kinds of outsiders—the demon-possessed, the sick & paralyzed, lepers, hemorrhaging women, tax collectors & sinners. Mary has already announced that God is up to some serious table-turning (Luke 1:46-55), & Jesus will have much more to say about wealth & status & the reversals God’s reign brings about (see also Luke 6:20-26; 7:18-23; 12:13-21; 14:12-14; 16:1-12, 19-31; 18:18-26; 19:1-10). It is important for preachers to resist the temptation to spiritualize this message. The spiritual aspect of salvation in Luke cannot be separated from economic, social, & political realities. Jesus’ mission is to free people from captivity to sin & from captivity to the sinful structures & systems that diminish & destroy lives. Preachers, of course, cannot control how people will respond to this message any more than Jesus himself could. We can only announce the good news & trust the Holy Spirit to be at work inviting partnership..... without fear of damnation or condemnation but rather with an invitation to all that a connection with God through Jesus means.

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

The books of Ezra & Nehemiah form one story. Ezra begins with Cyrus of Persia’s decree, in 538 BC, permitting the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem & to rebuild the Temple, a venture in which they are to be materially aided. Cyrus orders that the sacred vessels taken from the Temple in 587 be returned. More than 42,000 leave Babylon for Judah. The altar is erected on the site of the destroyed Temple; the priests again offer burnt offerings. Construction of the new Temple begins: a more modest structure than Solomon’s. The excerpt from Nehemiah, the sole selection from Nehemiah in the 3-year lectionary, is set next to Luke to show that Jesus continued the Jewish pattern of communal worship at which the Hebrew Scriptures were proclaimed & interpreted for the hearers. Although hearing the words of the law may incite mourning, Ezra says that encountering the voice of God always is joyful: “eat the fat & drink sweet wine”: in other words, let the party begin, & share it with others. We continue this pattern of worship on Sunday morning. But subversion arises among local people; they succeed in convincing the Persian king that the Jews plan a rebellion against his rule, so he halts rebuilding. Eventually construction is allowed to continue. Ezra, the scribe & priest, enters the picture in Ezra [7](#). Commissioned by King Artaxerxes, he travels to Jerusalem with a wave of exiles; he is “to study the law of the Lord ... & to teach the statutes & ordinances in Israel” (Ezra [7:10](#)), & to prepare the Temple for worship. He is to appoint “magistrates & judges” (Ezra [7:25](#)). Many scholars say that Nehemiah [8](#) (& [7:73b](#)) follow here (although Nehemiah [6:15-7:4](#) tell of the building of the walls of the city, including the “Water Gate”, Nehemiah [8:1](#)). The people who have come from Babylon are now “settled in their towns” (Nehemiah [7:73b](#)). The “book of the law of Moses” (v. [1](#)) is most likely an earlier version of the biblical

Leviticus. Note the stress on “understanding” (vv. [2](#), [3](#), [7](#)). V. [4](#) says that Ezra stood on a “wooden platform” or *tower*. The people agree to obey the law (“Amen”, v. [6](#)). Ezra reads in Hebrew (v. [8](#)); the Levites (priestly assistants) translate into Aramaic (the common language) & “gave the sense”, interpret it in the current context. Nehemiah is not listed elsewhere as a “governor” (v. [9](#)): here this is probably a prestige title. Ezra declares the day “holy”, a *sabbath*. It seems that what Ezra reads makes the people sad, but he commands that they celebrate a feast: vv. [14-15](#) tell us that this is the Festival of Booths (Tabernacles, *Sukkoth*).

Connections with the Liturgy

Every Sunday is modeled after the Nehemiah reading: the entire community gathers on the holy day; the scriptures are read; God is praised; & the people call out Amen & later give food to those in need. Although in Nehemiah the assembly goes home for a meal, Christians remain in the body that Paul describes, sharing in the joy of the wine of salvation.

The Prayer of the Day

The prayer of the day is based on one of the masterpieces penned by Thomas Cranmer, whose life & death is commemorated on March 21 (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, p.15). Cranmer, renowned for his talent in shaping beautiful formal English, was the Archbishop of Canterbury under England’s King Henry VIII & oversaw the creation of the 1st Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. He was burned at the stake in 1556 by the Roman Catholic Queen Mary for his support of the Protestant Reformation.

Life on the Earth

One of the ideas behind the Year of Jubilees to which the Isaiah citation refers was that even the earth needed a rest & was not to be cultivated one year in fifty. Although it is unlikely that this ever literally was enacted, the festival of Jubilees articulated the sense that the people cannot be free unless they can free also the earth from overuse.

Comments from the Cloud of Witnesses

Jesus began his ministry with these words read from a scroll of the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” The arrival of the dominion of God was, in those words, inextricably tied to helping the poor, releasing prisoners, healing the sick. & yet the poor remain in our streets, our prisons are overcrowded as never before, & everyone of us will eventually succumb to ill health & physical death. Had Jesus failed? . . . Following in his steps from that early synagogue worship service, to the hills of Galilee, the road to Jerusalem, & the way of

the cross, we discover that suffering is not God's will. Rather, life in the face of suffering is God's will; courage in the face of fear; faith in the face of doubt & abandonment; love in the face of hatred & prejudice. God's will is to call these things out of the hurt & brokenness that we are & that we find around us. With Christ, the prophecy is fulfilled, in you & in me. —*Bruce J. Evenson*

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