

Westminster Sermon – “Standing Up”

Sunday, January 24, 2016

Scripture Readings – Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Luke 4:14-21

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Our first reading, Nehemiah chapter 8, verses 1-3, 5-6, and 8-10, takes place during the postexilic period. Those who were in exile in captivity in Babylon have returned to Israel and to the holy city of Jerusalem, where they are struggling to reintegrate with those who remained behind. Under the leadership of the priest Ezra and the governor Nehemiah, the people of Israel have overcome much internal conflict and have rebuilt the temple and the city walls. Now they gather on the day that will become Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, to hear the Word of God. Hear now God’s holy Word.

*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." Amen.*

Our second reading is from the gospel of Luke, chapter 4, verses 14-21. After his baptism in the Jordan, Jesus spends forty days alone in the wilderness. After being tested and tempted by the devil, Jesus leaves the desert and begins his ministry, starting in his home region of Galilee. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.

*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."*

This is the Word of the Lord.

The title of the sermon: “Standing Up”

*The text: “Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘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 the year of the Lord’s favor.’” Luke 4:17b-19*

Let us pray: Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the Scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Did you notice the slightly odd thing going on in our Scripture readings today? Both our passages are effectively Bible stories about Bible stories. Here we are, standing up to open the book and read the Scripture and proclaim its interpretation to the gathered people of God—and the passages we read tell of standing up to open the book and read the Scripture and proclaim its interpretation to the gathered people of God. It’s all a bit meta.

Yet how fitting for Presbyterians, to have Scripture readings about the importance of Scripture being read in the lives of God’s chosen. And, not surprisingly for Bible stories about the Bible, both these passages reference additional pieces of Scripture—they must, since it is Scripture being read in the Scriptures we read.

So indulge me—before we go any further, let’s go over a quick breakdown of the Bible. This would be easier in the youth room with my whiteboard behind me, but we’ll do our best. Feel free to draw your own map. The Hebrew Bible and our Old Testament contain three distinct parts. First is the Torah, the Law. These are the books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Second is the Navi’im, or the Prophets in English. This is all the prophetic books—Micah, Amos, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and so on. Finally, we have the Ketuvi’im, the Writings. This has the widest range, including the literature of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes as well as the historical books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. So—in summary, we have the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

Our first reading today, Nehemiah, is part of the Writings, a historical book about the return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon, the rebuilding of the temple, and the re-institution of Jewish worship. In our reading, the priest Ezra and the governor Nehemiah gather the people together, and Ezra reads the Law to them. We don’t know which part, but we are told it is the book of the law of Moses, which would make it part of the Torah. Our second reading, from the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament, has Jesus himself reading from Isaiah, part of the Prophets. Now, it gets even trickier, because this reading, the opening of Isaiah 61, references Leviticus 25, which is part of the Torah. So we have Nehemiah, from the Writings, referencing the Law, and we have a gospel referencing the Prophets, which in turn references the Law. Does anyone have a headache yet?

In these two Bible stories about the Bible, we are taken on a little tour through the entirety of the Old Testament, touching on each of the three parts of the Hebrew Bible. Which seems fitting for Scripture passages about Scripture. But how does one tell stories about telling stories? Interestingly, both Nehemiah and Luke focus on the actions of the readers and listeners. These are two of the rare places where the Bible is abundant with active detail. In fact, these stories practically contain stage directions—we could easily act out both scenes. At the Water Gate the people of Israel stand up, lift their hands, bow their heads. Their ears are attentive, and the book is opened in their sight. In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus stands up to read—the scroll is given to him—he unrolls it—he finds his place—he reads—he rolls up the scroll—he gives it back—he sits down. The Bible is NEVER this detailed.

I think a few things are going on in this wealth of description. First, I wonder if the authors of these texts focus so much on physical actions because there is no other way to describe reading and listening. We primarily think of these as passive things, quiet and still, mental, rather than physical. And how does one describe a mental process? Our Scripture writers both solve this problem by focusing on the actions and bodies involved, describing a mental process by describing the physical outcomes. Which brings me to the second point: I wonder if the action in these stories is so uniquely detailed because reading and hearing Scripture is not supposed to be still, quiet, passive, and solely mental, but rather is meant to be an ACTIVITY—active, physical, and whole bodied.

In these stories we see that reading and hearing Scripture should engage our entire selves—should move our bodies to action—that, as our ears are attentive, our eyes are engaged and our hands lift and our heads bow and our legs and feet move to stand us up. Whatever Scripture Ezra reads to the people certainly moves them emotionally, for they are moved to tears when they hear the Word of God. Yet this is not enough movement, nor is the lifting of their hands and bowing of their heads enough, for Nehemiah tells them to stop—not to weep or mourn their failure to obey God, but to GO. Go your way, eat the fat, drink sweet wine, for this day is holy to the Lord!

Nehemiah tells the people that the reading of Scripture has made the day holy, and that they should be moved to move their feet, moved to the joy of the Lord who is their strength, moved to feast on rich and abundant things—and moved to share that feast with those who have nothing, and not to be grieved that in sharing, their own table might be less full. But to rejoice! For the joy of the Lord, shared and enjoyed by ALL, is their strength, and they learn this through the reading of Scripture. The reading of Scripture in Nehemiah is the beginning of renewed public Scripture reading in Jewish life. By the time Jesus stands up to read Isaiah in his childhood synagogue in Nazareth, public reading of Scripture is a weekly custom.

So what does Jesus choose to read? What is the word he chooses to read and proclaim? He reads the opening of Isaiah 61, a passage about the Jubilee year. Indulge me again. In the book of Leviticus, the law of Moses, there is a mandate, echoed in Deuteronomy, that every fifty years must be a Jubilee year, a sort of super-Sabbath year, in which no work is done. In the Jubilee year, the year of the Lord's favor, all debts must be forgiven, all slaves set free, and land and property redistributed so that all people share equally in the physical wealth of God's blessing. His listeners would have been familiar with this, and would have been waiting to hear about waiting for this year of God's favor. But the teaching Jesus offers in this passage is to tell his listeners that this Scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing. How can the Jubilee have been fulfilled in their hearing, in that exact moment? They are still poor Jews from Nazareth, still struggling to make ends meet, still under the power and control of Rome. There is still inequality among them, within the congregation itself. The wealth has not magically redistributed itself as Jesus spoke and they listened. Nothing has changed. What has been fulfilled?

Well. This word is read to them by THE Word—the Scripture has been read by the Word of God made flesh—the prophecy is read by the one who is the fulfillment of ALL prophecy! And that is true, and that is good news—but most days it is only mentally, intellectually satisfying, if that. We have tried to understand this teaching since the day it was uttered. For the year of the Lord's favor has still not come. And besides, what does it mean for us today, right here as we listen to Scripture and are attentive to its interpretation? Is it fulfilled in our hearing, too? Or has it already been fulfilled, two thousand years ago?

Both our passages today are about the role of Scripture in the life of the people of God. Both these passages show us scenes that are deeply familiar to us, for we do the same thing week after week. Here we are, opening the Book, reading the Word, standing up and sitting down to hear and trying to understand, moving through the same actions as the ancient people of Jerusalem at the Water Gate, and the congregation in

Nazareth, that small, small backwater in the Roman Empire. What did Jesus mean? For the Scripture was fulfilled in him, the Beloved Son of God, full of the Holy Spirit, the promised Christ, the long awaited Messiah, THIRTY YEARS before he spoke those words. The Scripture was fulfilled at his birth, when the Word became flesh and first lived among us! How is it fulfilled TODAY, in their hearing?

I wonder if the Scripture, this good news of release, sight, freedom and favor is fulfilled IN their hearing, through their hearing, if the actual action of hearing is the fulfillment of Scripture. For as we are instructed by Ezra and Nehemiah, the hearing of Scripture is not simply passive listening, but instead demands from us a whole-bodied response! The true hearing of Scripture means MOVEMENT of ourselves and bodies. The hearing of Scripture moves us out into the world to feast and be joyful and share what we have with those who have none—to redistribute wealth and property, to forgive debts, to set the oppressed and enslaved free: to enact the Jubilee and bring about the year of the Lord's favor.

Today the Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing, for it is your hearing that fulfills it. Just as it has been for thousands of years, the Word is the food of the people of God. And when we are nourished in the hearing of Scripture, we are strong enough to STAND UP and MOVE—to move out into the world and be disciples, sharing what we have, restoring all people to the abundance of God's creation, so that we might all joyfully feast together.

For hearing is not a quiet, still, passive thing. After all, if it were, why would we read Scripture about the people of God hearing Scripture? Hearing God's word demands the engagement of our whole selves and the movement of our bodies. So stand up! Go your way! Make your hearing of Scripture today the fulfillment of God's word, so that we might proclaim with Christ, who is the Word, the arrival of the year of God's favor.

Amen.