

Sermon – **January 24, 2016** – 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Nehemiah 8:1-10,

1 Corin. 12:12-31

Psalms 19, Luke 4:14-21

“Return to the Scriptures” – **Jeanne Thrasher**, Elder, Piedmont Presbyterian Church

Let us pray: You gather us from our separate lives, Great God, to hear your word and respond to your revealing. You have appointed us for the work of your church. We seek your guidance, your wisdom, your way. Help us to perceive and understand your law, and then to follow you faithfully, as your people. Bind us together with you in worship, and transform us from distinct persons into the Body of Christ, alive with your Spirit in this place. May the words in our mouths and the thoughts in our hearts delight you, O God. Amen.

Both Jesus and Nehemiah saw their own actions in the light of Scripture. Jesus saw himself as fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy; Nehemiah brought the people back into living contact with the word of Scripture and made it operative in their lives by calling on the people to renew the covenant their ancestors had made with God—a covenant recorded in Scripture.

In our Gospel story, Jesus returns to Galilee and enters the synagogue in Nazareth. Here he gives what has been called his inaugural sermon. He reads from the book of the prophet Isaiah. These words offer hope and good news to the poor, and tell of healing and freedom for the oppressed. This time, Jesus says, has begun—Scripture is being revealed.

Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. It was the right of an adult Jew to read and comment on the Holy Scriptures. And Jesus was a regular attendee at his local synagogue, as we read in verse 15. Because the Sabbath Law forbade work, which was interpreted strictly, there were no short services followed by freely-indulged leisurely activities. The whole day could be spent in discussion and debate. As long as there were ten men to make a quorum (a minyan), synagogue meetings lasted for hours. There might be several readings and commentaries, followed by debates. So, what Jesus started to do was not unusual. From the description, we see that “He stood up to read” from the scroll, which is how the Scriptures are presented in synagogues, even in today's age of bound books, for Torah

scrolls are sacred. It was customary after reading to sit down and men would angle themselves to listen to a speaker, which explains why all eyes were fastened on him. However, the fact that Luke takes pains to mention this, seems to indicate an unusual level of interest in a – now notable – preacher. He has taken them back to Scripture to announce his arrival as Messiah—I imagine all eyes were on him.

During the Exile, beginning about 586 BC, the Jews were captives in Babylon, whose ruins now lie about 30 miles from Baghdad, in modern Iraq. The Exile is usually described as seventy years because the Temple was not functional until 516 BC.. Jews were a displaced people: their culture was threatened and, with it, their very existence. As a result of this displacement, the Law started to be an even more important means of togetherness. They had failed their God and not kept the Laws of Moses; now was a time for reflection and trying to fix their disobedience.

In 539 BC, the Persian King, Cyrus issued a decree that has inspired the Jews ever since: “This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: “The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up, and may the Lord their God be with them.”” It seemed to the Jews, now free to go home, that the God of Israel was the Lord of History The sage of the Return and successive attempts under Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem's walls, homes, Temple and community of faith—while surrounded by enemies who plotted against them—is a heroic one. It was a fight for survival to ensure that Israel returned to its homeland. If its understanding of God's grace was flawed, it had to return, so that there would be a Jewish community in Israel for Jesus Christ, the Son of God to be born into, even though He would come to tell them the core Law of Love.

The passage from the Old Testament today shows two great Bible characters: Ezra the Law-Giver, a Second Moses to the Jews; and Nehemiah the Tirshatha, or Governor, a Jewish official of the Persian King. They devoted themselves to fulfill the Return, not just to the city but to the Law. The passage here is a description of how the Law was not only read, but taught, to the people at the beginning of the seventh month. Like Joshua, the son of Nun, friend and companion of Moses, who entered the Land, feasting from its produce at the Spring Festival, Passover, so would the Jews now at the Autumn Harvest Festival, called the Feast of the Tabernacles or Booths, was to be celebrated that seventh month in the way Joshua did. It was a triumph for Jews, but there was no time for celebration while the Law was untaught.

They taught a united people. Before the feast, they had to get right with God, to prepare themselves for sacred worship. They moved to an open area to the south-east of the Temple area, and the people asked Ezra to take out the Law of Moses to teach them. This was at the Jewish New Year, so their morale was high and their gratitude to God was deep, because their walls had been rebuilt by faith and by united effort. “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. And Ezra the priest brought the Law before the congregation

both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month.”

Notice here, that there is no obvious segregation between men and women. Even young children who could understand were included in the teaching. It was a community event.

They taught in a structured way. There was nothing haphazard about the occasion. Verse 4 tells us that, “Ezra, the teacher of the Law, stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion.” This took planning and construction. To this pulpit was added a team of teachers, six on Ezra's right and seven on his left. The reading and teaching was to last for six hours, but readings from the Law interspersed with teaching sessions, explaining what they had heard. In other words, it was as well-structured as the organization. This confirms the high level of seriousness brought to it, to which people responded positively, listening attentively to what was taught. It was taken seriously, because understanding the Law of their community was part of belonging.

They had a high degree of mutual respect and working. Verse 7 says that the people were standing as they were taught. It literal, it is a sign of self-discipline. Verse 5 tells us that the people stood up with respect at the opening of the Law, a practice of the early church, seen today in many churches when the Bible comes in.

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. The event was firmly grounded in the worship of God by everyone there, without exception, and there was effective mutual working by Ezra, Nehemiah, Priests, Levites and people: 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...They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

We see a people responding to God, and to each other in God, in mutual respect and with seriousness. It recalls a time in our own land when people discussed sermons in fellowship meetings, and on the road to and from Church. The sermon was only part of a network of conscious learning, in which experienced Christians helped in the process of teaching, not allowing doctrine to be lost through inattention or any lack of reflection to fritter it away.

They celebrated their togetherness in God. There was no reactivity in the leaders: what they told the people to do was as organized and community-minded as the event itself, with a sincere love that was worthy of the Lord.

“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.'” They must: a) celebrate in food and sweet drink; b) share with the poor, c) honor the Lord by not grieving but showing joy, strong in heart, knowing that they belonged to God.

It is as old as humankind to eat and drink together to show we are at peace with each other. From two families at wedding meals, to the family of God at Communion where we see God in our midst, our eating and drinking is a public demonstration of peace. This is why, when we cannot accept an invitation to eat and drink with someone, we begin with, "I'm sorry." Eating and drinking is a sign of peace and fellowship: to refuse with no word of explanation could indicate that you are not at peace with them. So, here is Nehemiah 8, as is normal in society and Biblical covenants, God's people, who had just shown their genuine grief at having failed God in the past, were invited to eat and drink in peace.

A touching detail is that during the Spring Festival of Passover they ate unleavened bread and bitter herbs, a memorial of the bitter captivity in Egypt. Here, in the Feast of Tabernacles, they are to have choice food and sweet drinks as a sign of freedom—not only having built the wall and securing their city but having put the Law of their God in the center of their lives and the core of their hearts.

They were to honor God by not grieving but showing joy, being strong in heart, knowing that they belonged to the Lord. Nehemiah said, "The joy of the Lord is your strength." Nehemiah, Ezra and all of the people lived in expectation of God's deliverance, but did not see it. They had only the Law to hold onto, which set them apart. Yet even that, in its day, was enough of a promise from God to give them joy to share. How much more wonderful that all that they hoped for was fulfilled long after their time for them, and for all who believe!

Joy is our strength, even in difficult times. For a Christian, a calamity or illness, dying or not, can be a place of hope, peace, and in a strange way, joy. Christ died on the Cross for the joy that was set before Him and He gives that joy to all who believe.

Like the story of Israel, this passage from Nehemiah begins with Law but teaches Love. And yet Love is a Law too, the greatest, most challenging law of all. The Apostle Paul wrote in to the Romans: "Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law."

Jesus said such love was costly, even sacrificial, the greatest test of our obedience to God. "Greater love has no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you." This Law demands more than keeping regulations. God's priority is Love. All leadership, all ministry that would change the world and defend the poor and vulnerable will show the sacrifice of Christ. It was foreseen in prophets and apostles. Now we are called to this joy.

It took a long time, but the people of Judah eventually got reacquainted with the Holy Scriptures. Since the people themselves were the repository of God's covenant

and the guardians of the divine revelation, it was important for them to understand and then reaffirm the covenant made with Abraham, which later evolved into the final covenant about Jesus as the Messiah. The people of Judah had an enormous responsibility.

Today, where is the repository of God's covenant and divine message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ? It's with all of us. What a sobering thought! The very essence of God's divine message to humanity rests with us. Therefore, it's incumbent on us to understand this message, interpret it accurately, and deal with the questions of those who may not completely understand it.

Today then, would be a good time for us to focus on how important the Bible is, how God has worked in our history, and to remember that he continues to be present and active in our lives today. Like Jesus, we are called to fulfill God's prophecies of a new age. Like Nehemiah and the Jewish people, we are continually called upon to renew our covenant with God, to live out our own story recorded in the Scriptures.

We have an obligation—not only to ourselves and to our children, but also to those outside the church—to read the Bible, analyze its message carefully, and then apply it to our lives in practical ways.

Let us pray: O Lord, help me not only read your Word, but understand and demonstrate its meaning in my daily life. Give me a thirst for wisdom and a longing to see my faith in Jesus Christ bear fruit in my everyday experience. In his name I pray. And all of God's people say: Amen.