

Sunday Sermon
January 27, 2019
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Luke 4:14-21
“People of the Word”

Introduction

At a church where I served previously, we lost the Bible for the lectern. One busy Advent with moving things for a 15-foot Chrismon tree and having a Greening of the Church service and Lessons and Carols and two Christmas pageants and candle lighting ceremonies with liturgical dancers, not to mention four funerals, someone wisely decided to move the lectern Bible to a “safe place.” You can probably guess what happened; after Christmas when we undecorated, no one could not find that “safe place.”

A huge lectern Bible is not likely something someone would steal. It is not likely something someone could easily throw away. It is not likely something someone would gather up with their stuff and accidentally carry away. So we figured the Bible had to be somewhere in the church.

I was determined to find it. I took a flashlight and scoured every dark corner and high shelf in every closet in the building. No lectern Bible.

The members were concerned. “It will be okay,” I said, “the Word of the Lord is still among us. Someday, when you do remodeling and move things around, you will find the old Bible. And when that happens, do like the people in Nehemiah. Gather everyone together, have someone stand and read from the Bible, have a party and share food with those in need.”

I

The Israelites had been in exile for many decades in far-away Babylon. In Babylon, the people had no Temple, no place of worship. They had no scrolls with the Word of the Lord. And yet to their surprise they found that the Word of the Lord was still with them.

Then when the Babylonian empire fell to the Persians, captives were allowed to return to their native lands. So the Israelites returned to their land to rebuild Jerusalem.

Once returned they found themselves literally picking up the pieces of their lives. During the rebuilding of the city walls, a scroll was discovered, one that had been placed in the wall for safe keeping. You know, come to think of it, I did not check inside the walls of the church for the lectern Bible.

Nehemiah says what they found in the wall was the book of the law of Moses that the Lord had given to Israel. The narrative says all the people

gathered and asked the priest Ezra to bring the recovered scripture and read it to them.

Notice it was the people themselves, not their religious leaders, who clamored that day for the Torah to be read. And when they gathered, it was not in the area of the Temple where only the men could hear. Instead they congregated by the water gate where men and women, teens and kids could all be present. From early dawn until noon, Nehemiah says the people stood there, listening to Ezra read the Word of God that had been found.

And it is at this point that we know that there was not a Presbyterian in the crowd because the text says that when Ezra blessed the Lord, the people called out “Amen! Amen!” lifting up their hands.

I once served on a presbytery staff in Charleston, South Carolina. A presbytery is the supportive council for all the Presbyterian churches in a region. That presbytery has the most predominately African American congregations of any presbytery in the denomination. I loved supply preaching in those churches, because worshippers there engaged in a lively call and response style of worship. The preacher would set forth a premise; the congregation would respond.

Then I moved upstate and went on the staff of another presbytery. The first time I preached in a predominantly black church in that area, it was different. There was energy in the music before the service, and the giving of the offering was a lively time. But during the sermon, no one offered a single “Amen.” No one stood and lifted hands in praise. The organist and the choir did not chime in with a supportive melody. The congregation was completely silent.

I thought I had failed in connecting with the congregation. Yet after the service, people said they appreciated the sermon. “But,” I said, “no one responded.” “Oh,” they said. “We are silent during the scripture reading and the sermon, because we are listening. We are listening for the Lord to speak a word to us.” Sitting silently, waiting eagerly, expectantly for a word from the Lord.

II

Nehemiah says that as the Israelites listened, they began to weep. Perhaps they were remembering the time of exile, its oppression and difficulties and no place of worship and no scrolls of scripture.

Or perhaps as they listened to the law they realized how far short their actions had fallen from God’s expectations for them.

Or perhaps their tears were tears of joy, for the recovery of God's Word and their realization of God's abiding presence and care for them through it all.

The Word of the Lord does all of that. So Ezra and Nehemiah told the people to rejoice instead of weep. To throw a party, have a feast and share bread with those who have no bread, because they are God's beloved, and the joy of the Lord is their strength.

III

Fast forward 500 years to the story in Luke. Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit from his baptism and wilderness testing, has begun teaching in the synagogues of Galilee. The reviews were good; he was received well. Then he returned home to Nazareth and went to worship at his home church. There the people invited him to read scripture and speak.

Jesus took the scroll, found and read the passage from the great prophet Isaiah about the promised servant of God: the one anointed by the Spirit to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight for the blind, let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Then in the posture of a teacher in that day, Jesus sat down and delivered a one-line, nine-word message, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The Word of the Lord fulfilled in their hearing.

Conclusion

Nehemiah says the ears of all the Israelites were attentive to Ezra's reading. Luke writes the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Jesus when he read.

The freed captives of Nehemiah's day had come to realize that the Word of the Lord was the most important thing they had. The persecuted Christians of the early church would discover the same - that the Spirit-filled Word of God was the most important thing they had.

Note that neither the people who had returned from exile nor the first century Christians who formed the church after Pentecost had buildings or budgets or paid staff or large memberships. But they knew they had what was most important.

Do we, blessed as we are with buildings and budgets and staff and members, realize the most important thing we have is the Word among us?

And do we realize the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, calling us to proclaim the good news and serve those in need?

Today the Word of the Lord is fulfilled in your hearing. Today

God's Word is among you, alive and ever new in the power of the Spirit.
May this be a year of the Lord's favor in this congregation. Amen.