

Third Sunday after Epiphany January 23 2022

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21

I remember my first story Bible. The pictures were what captured my imagination, but that was only because they went with the story read to me by my parents or, as I got older, as I read them. The pictures of the boy David, of Jacob tricking his father, Isaac. I remember the Arch Books, the great escape of the Israelites through the divided Red Sea, the house built on a Rock or on Sand. I still can see those images in my head.

These stories transfixed me. They filled me with wonder. I was aware that they were about the same thing they talked about in church Sunday. That these were the stories read from the lectern, that the Pastor preached to my parents about, that I learned in Sunday School and that my parents and their friends talked about in their Sunday School. Every week. These stories, the Bible, wrapped around my whole life.

We see something similar today in our readings from Nehemiah and Luke.

What is being described in Nehemiah is a significant and hard-won moment in Israel's history. After the Jewish state was defeated by the Babylonians in 586 BCE a large portion of the population was taken into exile from the Promised Land. Nehemiah is the descendent of these exiles. He is a minor figure in the court of the king of Persia, who now rules Babylon and the land of Israel. When Nehemiah hears that Jerusalem is a city in ruin, the walls have crumbled, there has been a recent fire that has done more damage, the people are in distress. He asks the king to be allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city of his

ancestors. To restore the wall surrounding it. Given permission, he works in conjunction with the priest Ezra who is seeking to re-establish the worship of the One True God of Israel, which has slackened in the intervening years since the fall of Jerusalem and the exile.

After overcoming many obstacles, Nehemiah finally succeeds in rebuilding Jerusalem's wall and gates. Those things necessary for it to defend itself and a step on the way to becoming a city of importance again. He invites his people back from exile, to return to the promised land and its most significant city. These exiles and those Jews living in Jerusalem are gathered at the Water Gate to celebrate the completion of the wall. And they call upon Ezra to "bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel". This is the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, still read today in their synagogues. And Ezra begins to read this text in the hearing of the crowd. He reads from early morning until mid-day. Proclaiming the stories of their ancestors. The stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, of how God led their people out of slavery in Egypt through Moses. The people, we are told, listen attentively, they stand as Ezra reads, a sign of reverence. They worshipped the God who was speaking to them through this text. And the people weep when they hear the words.

Perhaps this is out recognition of how short they had fallen in obeying their God. Their recognition of their sin towards God and one another. Perhaps it is sorrow over what they had been missing this whole time, when they had been ignoring the Scriptures and their obligations of the Covenant with God. But something in the text has touched them, changed them perhaps.

But they are told by Ezra and the priests not to weep, but to rejoice! To eat the oh so good fatty part of the calf, to drink sweet wine, not bitter tears. To share of this abundance with others who have none and to have joy in the Lord God. To lay aside weeping and take up this joy in the One who is faithful, even when we are not.

As author Debie Thomas puts it, “It’s an astonishing image of a communal Bible reading experience that takes a diverse group of people on a journey from attentiveness to comprehension to affirmation to wonder to grief to worship to joy to celebration. I read it over and over again with an aching sense of need, desire, and envy. When was the last time I read the Bible with such sustained attentiveness and expectation? When was the last time I savored the sweetness and the sorrow it contains? When was the last time I trusted God’s Word to tell me my story; to hold, recognize, and contain me; to name the contours of my past, present, and future — in ways that brought me to my knees in relief and gratitude?”

“Something powerful and transformative happens when Ezra opens the book. What happens is not magic. Neither is it manipulation. What happens is that the people consent to listen to God’s Word with their whole hearts, to receive what’s read in a spirit of openness and vulnerability, and to express their comprehension in acts of celebration and sharing.

What would it be like to open the book and find such authentic joy?”

The 4th chapter of Luke picks up just after Jesus has successfully defended himself from the three temptations of the devil in the wilderness following his baptism.

Now, filled with the power of the Spirit, Jesus preaches in the synagogues of Galilee and those who hear him sing his praise. He has gone viral!

Jesus heads home to Nazareth and goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath (Saturday) “as was his custom”. As we know, from Luke, his parents raised him to do. And who is there? People he knew, who were familiar to him, who had helped raised him in the faith and seen him grow. He was in familiar territory here. Asked to be the teacher of the day, he chooses a text from Isaiah and after reading it, sits, the posture of teaching in the synagogue. Today, he says, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. One way to interpret this sentence is to understand that it is in the hearing of those assembled, in their encounter with the Word of God proclaimed that- it has become real.

That the importance is not the reading of the text itself, but the interaction of the word and the hearer. The synergy of word and response.

In both these texts, something happens in the encounter with the Word of God contained in scripture. It is attended to by the assembly, it is received, and in that interaction between Word and hearing something happens to them and to the world.

Within Judaism the scriptures are understood to be a living thing, something to be listened to, argued with, to be constantly incorporated into our lives and rethought in light of what God has done in the past and is doing now. The Scriptures are the active voice of the Living God. They read Scripture and heard it expecting that something would happen. It might be a simple reminder of a truth, like leaving an empty chair at the table on the Passover for Elijah, who they wait to come to announce the Messiah. It might be a recollection of their own

forgetting of God that moves them to tears and calls them to account. But the expectation is that the Scriptures will evoke something, just like any conversation with another.

How do we see our Scriptures? This collection of texts that we call the Bible, that we say is the rule and norm of our faith what guides and informs our living. Do we see it as a living, breathing voice of God? Or is it some dead text, locked in, a good source of information, but not a dialogue partner. Not a place to expect to be brought to tears, transformed, filled with joy, or laughter, or hope. Giving us information, not telling us the story of our ancestors and of God's pursuit of God's people.

What an awful thing that would be, to live that way. To see the Bible as something less than even the latest best seller. How many have been brought to tears by the last book that you read, or laughter? I saw a recent meme that talked about someone laying down a book and saying, "I'm going to pick this back up and I better not have read what I thought I read." Do we expect the Bible to do even that for us? If not, why not?

As Christians who happen to be Lutheran, we should be last to believe that about our Book of Faith, because we understand that God's Word to us is first and foremost Jesus. As we have heard most recently in the Gospel of John, "in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." Jesus is God's Word to us, the living, breathing embodiment of that creative and redeeming Word. Second, the Word is scripture. But Luther said it is so because we look in those texts for Jesus. We look in them to find the born, crucified, buried, and resurrected one. To find the living Son of God. And finally, the Word

is the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints as we proclaim the good news to one another and our neighbors. As the hearing of the Word is fulfilled by its encounter with us. As we speak and move and act in reaction and response to that Word. Today this is fulfilled in your hearing. The Word is living. Scripture is alive.

Our confirmands are looking at the 10 commandments and one we looked at last week was the 3rd commandment to remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. Luther's Small Catechism reminds us that this means that "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God's word, but instead keep that word holy and gladly hear and learn it." To listen to it attentively and expect that it will tell us our story. That it will hold, recognize, and contain you. That it will name the contours of your past, present, and future.

Friends in Christ, it is never too late to recover this. It was almost 150 years after the exile that Nehemiah returned, and the people gathered at the Water Gate. Gathered to hear the Word they had neglected for so long. Gathered, attentive and expectant. It is never too late to wrap our lives in and around the story of the living God. To respond with tears at times, surely. Convicted as we hear our own sinfulness. But also knowing that God calls us to rejoice, even through our tears.

Maybe we start with those beloved Children's Story Bibles. Maybe it is with a more narrative text, like Walt Wangerin's *The Book of God*. However it may be in this new year let us strive to hear God's Word on a regular basis with hope and expectation, to join in dialogue with this living breathing Word. To encounter here the Word come down in Jesus who brings good news and proclaims our release from all that binds us. To taste and see that the Lord is good.