

Third Sunday After Epiphany, Year C

January 24, 2010

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a; Luke 4: 14-21

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

{7:73b} When the seventh month came--the people of Israel being settled in their towns \square *{8:1}* 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 \square *{8:5}* 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 \square *{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."

Psalm 19

{1} The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. *{2}* Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. *{3}* There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; *{4}* yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, *{5}* which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. *{6}* Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat. *{7}* The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; *{8}* the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; *{9}* the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. *{10}* More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. *{11}* Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. *{12}* But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. *{13}* Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression. *{14}* Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

{12} For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. *{13}* For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. *{14}* Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. *{15}* If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. *{16}* And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. *{17}* If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? *{18}* But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. *{19}* If all were a single member, where would the body be? *{20}* As it is, there are many members, yet one body. *{21}* The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." *{22}* On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, *{23}* and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; *{24}* whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, *{25}* that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. *{26}* If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with

it. {27} Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. {28} And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. {29} Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? {30} Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? {31} But strive for the greater gifts.

Luke 4:14-21

{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."

Since we are only one month past Christmas Eve, I don't think this illustration is too out of place. Every year, beginning around December 21, we tend to receive more phone calls than usual at the church, mostly inquiring about the times for Christmas worship. Inevitably, and I think any pastor or church office worker could vouch for this, two or three of those calls will be phrased in this way: "What time is your midnight Mass?" Even more strange is that we have to respond, "10 pm."

Now, I certainly don't intend to disparage such requests since there's a lot more to them and most folks are simply not paying attention to what they are actually saying, but at face value at least, it certainly is a silly question.

In what has to be one of the shortest sermons ever recorded, after reading from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus stated, "*Today* (emphasis mine) this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4: 21)

So deceptively simple.

Perhaps in a demonstration of that universal law of fairness ("what goes around comes around"), it so happens that today's Gospel story has sparked my own silly question: "When is today?"

I suppose there are all sorts of questions that can and do (and did) arise from this reading, but this is the one that screamed the loudest this week.

When is today? A silly question, but when it comes to understanding the Bible a bit better and to the "things of God" in general, maybe it's not so bad after all.

Beneath all of the issues that currently divide Lutherans from each other and Christian denomination from one another is, in large part, an understanding and interpretation of the Bible. This is sadly evident in all of the fuss over recent decisions by the ELCA regarding issues of sexuality.

Now, I haven't seen this in any "official documents" of the Church and, even though I think it is fully faithful to Luther's own distinctive view of Scripture, I must warn you that I could be treading on heresy here. I want to share my own way of understanding and appreciating the word of God, especially as contained in (but, hopefully not contained by) the Bible.

"Word of God", I think, is best understood as a verb rather than a noun, an event rather than a thing, a starting off point rather than a destination. The stories of the Bible provide gracious and grace filled examples of who God is "for us" and what God is up to among us at specific points in time and using specific people. I've said this before, but the "thread" running from cover to cover of the Bible is God's relentless and passionate pursuit of us and our world. The Bible calls attention to and invites us into that relationship, always being initiated and sustained by God. *That's* what the Bible is "for".

So, when it comes to the Bible, every day is "today".

The earliest Christians continued the Jewish practice of gathering for daily prayer and recitation of the psalms at morning, evening, and night. In the long tradition of the Church, including the Lutheran expression of it, the official daily worship, the first "official" words spoken by the Church, are taken from Psalm 95, also known as the *Venite* because of the first words: "*Come*, let us sing to the LORD; let us shout for joy to the rock of our salvation..." We are being invited to praise the creating and redeeming God. Listen to the conclusion to verse 7 (left out, strangely and unfortunately, by the Lutheran worship book, but maintained by Episcopalians and Roman Catholics): "For the LORD is our God, and we are the people of God's pasture and the sheep of God's hand. *Oh, that **today** you hear God's voice!*"

Today's Gospel story is, certainly, attempting to provide us with some "historical" facts about the beginning or inauguration of Jesus' ministry (the "who?", "where?", and "what?"). But there's always more to it than that. In this story we see at least two other things. The first is a glimpse into the dynamic relationship that Jesus of Nazareth Himself had with the Scriptures. I wouldn't have picked this up unless someone else had

pointed it out, but in quoting Isaiah, Jesus “mixes and matches” a bit (His quote is from chapters 61 and 58), and “skips” a bit (a part about “a day of vengeance of our God”- interesting and revealing).

The other thing this story does is to issue an invitation and challenge to us as individuals, as congregations, and as a Church: “How is the Scripture being fulfilled among *you*, in your hearing, *today*, right now? Do you recognize how God continues to speak and to seek us out?”

In his explanation of the second, third, and fourth petitions of the Lord’s Prayer from the *Small Catechism*, Luther made a brilliant, but easy to miss point. He said that God’s kingdom *will* come, God’s will *will be* done, and God *will* provide daily bread with or without our prayer and asking (because that’s who God is and what God does), that all this “comes on its own without our prayer”, but here we are asking to become part of it, to recognize, and to welcome it.

God’s word, God’s promises, Gods’ presence is always being fulfilled among us *today*, whether we realize it or not, like it or not, are ready or nor, deserve it or not.

Most times, to be honest, I would rather have absolute rules and an infallible and inerrant guide. It’s a lot easier. Just tell me what to do and how to think. If the Bible points to how God’s word and will continue to unfold and be fulfilled among us *today*, then we can, we do, and we will make mistakes. We sometimes miss it completely. Sometimes it takes the Church months, years, decades, or even centuries to “catch up” with what God is already doing. Those are the times when we simply fall back in trust to the person of Jesus, God’s living and eternal Word of grace and mercy. In Jesus, we are freed from the fear of always having to be “right”, certain, or absolute all the time.

It’s always easier and always tempting to see God’s Word being fulfilled in some golden past or ideal (and imaginary) future. It’s always easier and tempting to say: “Not here. Not now. Not me. Not us. Not them. Not there.”

Do you see God’s word being fulfilled *today*, right here and right now?

Let us pray. Not in the dark of buildings confining, not in some heaven, light years away- here in this place the new light is shining, now is the kingdom and now is the day. (*ELW* 532, v. 4)

When is today?

This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Psalm 188: 24) AMEN.