

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
January 27, 2019  
Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Nehemiah 8:1-10  
Psalm 113  
I Corinthians 12:12-27  
Luke 4:14-21

Our Gospel lesson today has us at a very important place in Luke's narrative. Luke tells us that Jesus has returned to Galilee following his testing in the wilderness by the Devil. He arrives in his hometown of Nazareth, and shows up on the Sabbath to attend the synagogue service.

A brief bit of context is necessary about the synagogue. You may recall that before the children of Israel were taken into captivity, the Temple was the center of life and worship.

But when the people were led into captivity, Jerusalem was sacked and the Temple – the dwelling place of God -- was destroyed. In subsequent generations, the synagogue arose as the place where the people gathered to worship God.

But unlike the Temple, which was led and run by priests, the synagogue was largely run by *laypersons*. One did not have to be a priest to read the Scriptures or to preach in the synagogue.

And, unlike the Temple, where worship always involved sacrifice, synagogue worship was comprised of two parts: a reading from the *Torah*, the first five books of Moses; and a second reading, usually from the Prophets.

From what Luke tells us, Jesus has been appearing in the synagogues on his way to Nazareth, and apparently has been causing quite a stir. In fact, one of the most telling comments of the Gospel writers about Jesus' teaching in the synagogues is that he "taught as one with authority" (as opposed to the scribes and teachers of the Law).

The Gospel writers are telling us something important with this statement. You see, in Jesus' day, preachers or teachers did not stand when they preached. Unlike what we are used to, in Jesus' day the preacher *sat down* in order to preach.

One of the reasons that a person sat down in order to teach or preach was because the synagogue had a special chair known as the "Seat of Moses." When a person taught or preached while sitting in the Seat of Moses, it symbolized that person as having the *authority* of Moses.

So when the Gospel writers tell us that Jesus teaches "as one with authority," they are making an important claim. They are saying that Jesus, as opposed to the scribes and religious professionals, *authentically carries the authority of Moses* when he sits in Moses' seat and teaches the scriptures.

This is precisely what is going on here in the synagogue at Nazareth. Luke tells us that Jesus reads the scriptures, hands the scroll back to the attendant, and then sits down, most likely in the Seat of Moses. This causes everyone to look at him intently. They are expecting a homily, or a comment about the scriptures that have just been read.

Now before we look at Jesus' first recorded sermon, which is actually quite brief, we need to look at the scripture text behind it.

The text comes from the prophet Isaiah. It is a very important text from Isaiah because of its explicit language using the term "Messiah." The term "Messiah" means "Anointed One." Isaiah speaks here about a mysterious figure upon whom God has placed the Spirit and "anointed" to preach the Good News. The Greek translation of the Hebrew term here for "anoint" is the word *chrío*, from which we get our word "christen."

So, Isaiah is speaking about the Messiah. But Isaiah tells us further that the Messiah has a mission: to proclaim Good News to the poor, to release captives, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come.

The NLT doesn't quite capture the essence of this last statement about the Lord's favor. A better translation is: "to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." This is a technical term, and refers to the Old Testament Year of Jubilee. You can read about it in Leviticus 25.

The important point about the Year of Jubilee was that after a 7 year cycle of a 7 year period (49 years), the 50<sup>th</sup> year would be a Year of Jubilee. It was a glorious time when several things happened. First, all debt was forgiven. Second, slaves were freed. And third, any land that a family had lost or had confiscated because of debt was restored to the original family who owned it.

Isaiah is speaking, then, about a Messiah. One anointed with the Spirit of God. And his coming is going to be linked to a Jubilee Year.

Now, imagine with me for a moment. Many of us know what it is like to be in debt. Student loan debt. Mortgage loan debt. Credit card debt. If you've ever experienced debt at any significant level, you know from experience that *debt is a form of bondage*.

Imagine, then, how you would feel if suddenly your debt was wiped away!

Isaiah is speaking about One who is anointed by God, a Messiah. And his coming will be marked by Good News to the poor and oppressed, and will be connected to a Jubilee. These are the words on the scroll that are given to Jesus to read:

*The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.*

This is the text for Jesus' first recorded public sermon. Jesus hands the scroll back to the attendant, and sits down in the Seat of Moses. And then he says: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

It's a one sentence homily. But it's like dropping a bundle of dynamite into a backyard swimming pool.

It's one thing to say that a Messiah is coming. *But it's quite another thing to say that a Messiah is here.* And in one simple, declarative sentence, that's what Jesus does. He very simply and matter-of-factly says: "I'm here."

This scene in the Nazareth synagogue has parallels with our Old Testament lesson from Nehemiah. In that lesson, the children of Israel have been allowed to return home to Jerusalem from their Babylonian captivity. Our Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe how the people rebuilt the Temple and the walls of the city.

In our lesson from Nehemiah, the stage has been set for the people to re-establish the Law of Moses as their rule of life. Ezra is handed the scroll, he reads it, and the people respond as "one." Interestingly, Ezra begins reading on October 8 (the NLT), which was the first day of the Jewish New Year.

In the same way, Jesus stands up and is given the scroll, he reads from it, and proclaims a "Sabbath" of sorts, a great Year of Jubilee, a deliverance from slavery to sin and a release of the debts we owe to God.

In Nehemiah, the people greet Ezra “as one man.” And as today’s epistle proclaims, in the power of the Spirit the new people of God – the Church – is made one body with Christ.

This synagogue service in Jesus’ hometown, then, becomes a very powerful “epiphany.” In perhaps the shortest homily ever, we have a seismic shift. Instead of hearing the centuries old promise, “A Messiah is coming,” it is now announced that a Messiah *is here*. The preacher announces that *he* is the subject of the proclamation.

And the whole world – then and now – is still trying to figure out how to process that simple announcement from the Seat of Moses in the Nazareth synagogue.

One way to make sense of it is to kneel or stand at a rail, to open your hands and your heart, and to experience Jubilee – to allow him to free you from all that tries to bind you.

So rejoice. Give thanks, and embrace the grace he offers you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.