

“Life Work”¹

Two of today’s readings have a curious commonality; they are about someone reading scripture aloud in public. From Nehemiah we heard how about the descendants of those taken into exile in 587 BCE gather before Jerusalem’s Water Gate to hear Ezra read aloud the Law of Moses.² These people were allowed to return to Jerusalem by Cyrus the Great of Persia after he conquered the Babylonians in 539 BCE. Not only does he allow them to return to their ancestral lands, but he gives them money to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls and Temple. Having been in exile more than fifty years they are fraught with emotion when they hear their scriptures read to them in their spiritual home town.

In today’s Gospel Jesus reads to a group gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth, his home town. Jesus reads aloud from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. While the portions of Isaiah that he read were most probably familiar to those gathered there, the people sat in silence waiting for an interpretation of the reading. Jesus, from his seated position, the posture of a teacher tells them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”³

However, the similarities between the scriptures do not stop there. In both cases those in attendance are faithful Jews. Only those of great faith and longing would have made the four-month journey by foot through the wilderness to return to their ancestral home in Jerusalem. In Jesus’ case, we are told that they are in synagogue on the Sabbath. It is an indication of their devotion and Jesus’ that they are there.

Another similarity is journey, wilderness and return. The people in Nehemiah have been on a long journey in the wilderness to return to Jerusalem. Jesus has just returned from his forty days in the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. Nehemiah’s people have returned to their ancestral home and so has Jesus.

Then there is the sense of expectation. Some of the people in Nehemiah have wanted to return home for many years. Others have been raised on stories of the home country. After months of walking through the wilderness and the many hardships they endured, their long expected return home has been fulfilled. In Jesus’ time the Jews have been waiting for Isaiah’s prophecy to be fulfilled for centuries. Now they hear it is being fulfilled by one of their own. The next portion of Luke tells us that, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”⁴

Perhaps the most important similarity for us to recognize is how each of these readings might sound like an ending but they are just the beginning. The Jews who have returned from exile have much to celebrate. But their work is only beginning. There is a city to rebuild, including walls and the Temple. It is an emotionally powerful thing to hear their sacred texts read to them in Jerusalem, but that reading was to encourage and strengthen them for the work ahead. The Psalmist wrote, “How shall we

¹ The title is borrowed from the Donald Hall’s book *Life Work*, Beacon Press ©2003.

² Probably the Book of Deuteronomy

³ Luke 4:21, NRSV

⁴ Luke 4:22, NRSV

sing the LORD'S song in a strange land?"⁵ Now that they are home they can sing the song again, but it is not just a song of praise, it is also a song of work devoted to God.

When Jesus said to those in the synagogue, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he was not saying that the prophecy was fulfilled and the work was done. On the contrary, he was saying the work is just beginning. Now was the time to bring news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. It would not be fulfilled instantaneously by a statement in the synagogue; he was challenging them and us to get that work underway.

Christmas Day is a month behind us; the Day of the Epiphany was three weeks ago. Now we are deep into Ordinary Time. That time between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday when the promise of the Incarnation is ours to enact.

One of my favorite poems is by the African-American minister, theologian, and civil rights activist Howard Thurman. He wrote in his poem "The Work of Christmas":

"When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart."⁶

We are called to this work of finding, healing, feeding, releasing, rebuilding, peacemaking, and music making. That is "The Work of Christmas," the work of Jesus, the work of all God's people. Today and every day we are called to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy in the hearing of those who need it most. We are called as St. Theresa of Avila wrote, and I quoted last week, to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world.

Jesus calls. Isaiah calls. Ezra and Nehemiah call. The cloud of witnesses that have preceded us call. They call us to do "the work [God] has given us to do."⁷ Until the day when all the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed can all "proclaim the Year of the Lord's favor" is fulfilled in our hearing.

⁵ Psalm 137:4, King James Version

⁶ Howard Thurman. *The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations*, Friends United Press, ©1985

⁷ The Book of Common Prayer p.366.