

Sermon Notes Third Sunday after the Epiphany

[Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10](#) [1 Corinthians 12:12-31a](#) [Luke 4:14-21](#)

We read Scriptures to move us into the presence of God in our individual and corporate lives. God's nearness has been, is now and will be. We are asking, what does this mean for me and us in our time?

The passage we read from Nehemiah reminds us that liturgy, reading and understanding comes from a variety of biblical texts and that we are always changing how we live out these texts, the context of our experience, our place in time and political social, economic and geographic location matter when we reflect on responding to how we are called. (Ezra worked from scrolls, like Jesus, but at a vastly different time—no electronic screens.)

We often think of Paul's love as only 1 Corinthians 13. Paul was persuading new Christians that one of the ways they could express their faith was through understanding that our diverse gifts come together to build greater community.

In the passage we read this week in Luke, Jesus sets forth his mission as a prophet, standing up in the temple to read, then sitting down like a teacher or Rabbi, as though he was ready to teach. In this Gospel, Jesus first public appearance declares in the words of Isaiah, "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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In Jesus' declaration from Isaiah, he is also naming the theme of the nearness or presence of God which continues throughout the Gospel of Luke.

In our first text from Nehemiah is a power witness of the people of Israel "both men and women" (and children) gathering after devastation, destruction, exile and return to Jerusalem. The occasion is the rebuilding of the wall of the Temple and the return of the exiles after the rebuilding of the temple and the wall around Jerusalem. They gather to hear Torah, "the book of the law given Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel." Ezra declares "so that the people understood the reading." When the Ezra brings out the scrolls, he reads the scrolls not in the inner spaces of the Temple but outside, by the wall at the Gate, where insider and outsider could hear and understand. All the people are called to listen and pray, called together by the Nehemiah the governor to mark the occasion. We read this text because we remember the intent that all the people hear the gift of the law; all are invited to celebrate with joy their relationship with God. Later this celebration likely became the celebration of Rosh Hashanah which is celebrated today in September.

We continue with the reading with the first letter to the Corinthians where Paul wrote letters to a community of faith, responding to their questions. "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." (1Cor 1:10) He is calling the people to be united in Christ. Using the metaphor of the body, which is even more powerful today with our understanding of the parts of the body, he is reminding them that they are connected to Christ and to one another. We hear the familiar reminder that we have different gifts, and one is not more important than another—and do we believe it?

Jesus has left the wilderness before he enters the synagogue and takes up the scroll that is handed to him. To ask what this means in our contemporary context is to wonder how we are to respond in our own lives to the words of "good news to the poor." Is this a systemic change Jesus is imagining? We can follow the life of Jesus, in story, but our knowledge that Jesus named he cared for the poor, oppressed, and stranger is filtered through the faith he tells us "Christ died and is risen"—compassion, being one with the one who suffers, and bringing healing to those who cry aloud, and alienated and in pain lead us deeper into the presence of God—a journey we do not make alone.



How do we engage in our times, right now, with faith? How do we listen to the body of Christ that is here in this community and stretches around the world in space and time? "Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me... Christ be in quiet..., Christ in danger..."

*Susan+*