

Study and Preaching Notes

Sunday, January 21, 2007- Epiphany 3

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

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. 2Accordingly, 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. 3He 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. 5And 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. 6Then 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. 8So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

9And 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. 10Then 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."

The proclamation of the Law was a reminder to the people of the covenant relationship with God and what was required of them. It is part of a liturgical celebration which lead to the people responding in action. I would not want to take the same response today, that is, to remove foreigners from our midst, but we need to recognize that was the approved response from Ezra and Nehemiah. The gospel of Jesus Christ is an inclusive message and this is what governs our response together with listening to the Holy Spirit. The people wept on hearing the Law which may be the effect of realizing how far they had strayed from the covenant and they are told to celebrate instead. --Anna Grant-Henderson

According to R. Klein, "The public reading took place on what would be called New Year's Day in modern Judaism. The Water Gate was on the east side of the city, outside of the temple area, perhaps near the Gihon spring. This non-sacral area permitted participation by lay people as well as clergy. Men, women, and even some children (those who could understand) participated in the assembly.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

12For 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. 13For 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. 14Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15If 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. 16And 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. 17If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20As it is, there are many members, yet one body. 21The 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.” 22On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23and 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; 24whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, 25that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. 26If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

27Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. 28And 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. 29Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? 30Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Paul's theme appears to be unity in diversity...

W.Loader: “This passage belongs to the discussion “about spiritual gifts”, which began in 12:1. It is clear from the way our passage starts that it continues that discussion. It does so by focusing on unity. Claims to spiritual gifts had lead to disunity in Corinth. Paul is not denying the claims to have spiritual gifts, but he is seriously undermining the assumption that if one has such spiritual gifts one is spiritual. On the contrary gifts can be used inappropriately. That includes: divisively. When that occurs, such abilities generated by people's (original) openness to the Spirit, become the enemy of the gospel. By driving a wedge between people's gifts and their ultimate source Paul is able to call people to account whose spirituality is divisive.

“Even though Paul does employ the image of the body for the church, he gives Christ’s body some unusual twists that preclude its use for legitimating hierarchy. For example, in 12:22-24 Paul subverts the usual pride of place in the human body belonging to the head (which stands in the social body for the well born and educated) and instead points to the great honor attributed to the so-called unrepresentable parts (a not so subtle allusion to the poor). Or again, instead of stressing the harmonious working of the parts through recognition of proper function, in 12:24-26 Paul calls his audience’s attention to shared suffering, shared glorification, and shared rejoicing of the body parts. The body parts have concern for one another. This is not the language of hierarchy but of friendship (filiva). Paul’s use of the body image is innovative; he retains the notion of cohesion but replaces subordination with friendship as the principle for the body’s ongoing life. –D. Fredrickson

Luke 4:14-21

14Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 16When 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, 17and 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, 19to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” 20And 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. 21Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

These are the opening verses of Luke’s account of Jesus’ ministry. Gospel writers gave careful thought to how they began their accounts. Mark begins with the summary proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom, followed by the exorcism in the synagogue and people’s astonishment at Jesus’ new authority (1:14-15,21-28). Matthew begins with a massive rearrangement of Mark’s and Q’s material to produce two panels: the sermon on the mount in chapters 5-7 and the sample of Jesus’ deeds in Matthew 8-9, framed on either side by 4:23 and 9:35. Luke reaches down into Mark’s order and finds Mark 6:1-6, Jesus’ visit to his home synagogue. He transfers it up to make it the opening scene, expanding it with other traditions and extending it beyond our passage to 4:30. The result is remarkable. This week we look at only the beginning. - W. Loader

What part do baptized Christians play in “fulfilling” God’s work?

Jesus had opportunity to speak in the synagogue because there was no professional clergy. The president of the congregation would invite any appropriate person to comment on the scriptures. While the people of the synagogue were more biblically literate than most church-goers today, most commentary on the scriptures by laypeople was probably rote recitation of lessons that they had all learned in synagogue school. The only thing interesting about such recitation is listening to determine if the commentator remembered the lessons correctly. Will he get it right? Will someone have to correct him? When Jesus spoke, it was a completely different experience. "They were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority" (4:32). R. Carlson, Lutheran Theological Sem.

Can we say; 'The Spirit is obviously upon us because we go to the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed.' Can we say that this is why God has anointed us and thus, we can dare claim to be followers? Is that the mission of our church or do we say; 'That was Christ's mission, but we're still hammering out our own vision statement.'?"

Can you imagine if we reclaimed this mission of Jesus in our churches and quit trying to make ourselves "market savvy" with statements like; "The church that is real, relevant, and relational!" For goodness sake, we make Jesus sound like a car salesman! Let's quit playing word games with the eternal and take up the mission of Jesus the Christ. Let the poor call us good news. (One Family Outreach- J. Goebel)