

**Third Sunday after Epiphany – Year C**

**January 27, 2019**

**by**

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

**Psalm 19**

**1 Corinthians 12:12-31a**

**Luke 4: 14-21**

May the Words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

At creation, God spoke, and it was so; but with the coming of Christ, the Word takes on even greater meaning as the "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14). Our Old Testament and Gospel readings today focus on the power of God's Word as revealed through Scripture.

In the passage from Nehemiah, the scribe Ezra assembled the people in Jerusalem to hear the law of Moses and to instruct those present on what was read. As governor of Jerusalem, Nehemiah led the returning exiles in rebuilding the city that had been destroyed; but the spiritual foundation of the nation had to be restored as well. Without an understanding of and commitment of life set forth by Moses and the Commandments, there was fear that the people would repeat the same defection that had led to the destruction of the nation.

To guard against such failure, Nehemiah and Ezra resolved to set before all the people the revealed way of life that was God's intention for their welfare. Thus, the people gathered together, and "the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly" (Nehemiah 8:2). The fact that women are specifically mentioned among the gathered crowd is noteworthy, as women were not always included in such formal religious gatherings.

When Ezra opened the book and pronounced a blessing, the people "bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground" (Nehemiah 8:6). Ezra's position standing above the crowd calls to mind the image of Moses on Mt. Sinai as he delivered the law to the Hebrews.

When the people heard the words of the law, they wept as they began to realize how far they had strayed from God's will. Yet Nehemiah and Ezra assured them that this was no a time to mourn, "for this day is holy to our Lord; and not to be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." (Nehemiah 8:10)

The Gospel passage shows the people's response to another reading of the Word of God---here Jesus himself is the one who reads and interprets the words of the Prophet Isaiah. Jesus himself as the fulfillment of the law read by Ezra, links the present to the past and leads on to the future.

Immediately following his Baptism, Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness before he began preaching and teaching in Galilee. As reports of his ministry spread throughout the region, he "was praised by everyone" (Luke 4:15). Arriving in his hometown of Nazareth, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, as was his usual practice.

The local synagogues were the central focus of Jewish community life and worship and were important in the early Christian movement as well. A typical worship service would have included prayers, reading of Scripture, and commentary on the readings.

As the synagogues typically did not have professional rabbis, members of the congregation read Scripture passages. Thus, Jesus stood up to read the scroll from the Prophet Isaiah that began with the words, "The

Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me." Luke has already established that Jesus is filled with God's Spirit and now the purpose of this gift is to be disclosed.

The passage woven from Isaiah, describes the mission of Jesus: he comes to bring good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives and the oppressed; to restore sight to the blind; and to "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor". The poor included not only the economically deprived, but also those oppressed and marginalized by society.

Liberation from captivity entailed not only actual freedom from imprisonment, but release from servitude to sin as well. Jesus would also bring God's power to those suffering from physical impairment and illness. The proclamation of the "year of the Lord's favor" recalls the Jubilee Year observed every fifty years, in which the fields would lie unused, debts would be forgiven, people returned to their homes, and slaves set free.

After reading, Jesus returned the scroll to the attendant and sat down. He had the complete attention of the people in the synagogue as he declared, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus did not interpret the prophecy of Isaiah, but rather "he fulfilled it." The Kingdom of God was fully present in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

In Luke, this was Jesus' inaugural sermon that set the course for his entire ministry. He understood that he had received God's Spirit and that his mission was to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of emancipation and restoration.

Last week, we heard in the Epistle from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, which had to do with spiritual gifts. There are many spiritual gifts, by one Spirit. Today, Paul uses the analogy of the physical body to emphasize the importance of the unity of the community.

"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. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body. Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, we were all made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:12-13)

As members of the body of Christ, we are called to honor and respect one another as we participate in Christ's Jubilee mission to the world. Amen.