

“Welcome Words”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
January 26, 2025 - Third Sunday after the Epiphany

[Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21](#)

Please pray with me... “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen”
(William Sloan Coffin).

In today’s first scripture lesson from Nehemiah, we heard about the some of the people of Israel who had gathered in Jerusalem sometime after their ancestors had been removed from their land and taken into exile by the Babylonian Empire. For after the Babylonians who had conquered and exiled them where themselves conquered by the Persians, the Persian Emperor Cyrus allowed the people of Israel who were willing to return to the devastated land of their ancestors to do so and to rebuild the ruined city of Jerusalem and its destroyed temple. Some of the people of Israel indeed returned immediately, some others did so later, and many others just continued living wherever they were.

Today’s reading tells a story about some of those who *had* returned and where again living in Jerusalem and seeking to rebuild it and its ruined temple and to resume the religious traditions of previous generations. Those people had gathered together when one of their leaders, Ezra the priest, brought before them a scroll of the Torah, or the Law of Moses, the collection of the first five books of the Bible, and began to read it aloud so that the people could hear. And after reading, the text was interpreted, so that all who had gathered, young and old, could understand its words and what they meant for them.

But upon hearing the ancient text being read and explained, the congregation began to mourn and weep, for they learned that they had not been practicing the religious traditions of their ancestors, the ways that Moses’ Law required of them, while they were living in exile. But the people’s wise leaders, Ezra the priest and Nehemiah, their governor, instructed them to stop their weeping and to mourn no longer, and to joyfully celebrate instead, for while their worship of God and their life as a community of faith had been interrupted, they as a people and their practices had been restored. That day of the reading of the Torah was then to be

a holy and joyous day of feasting and merriment, for that which was ruined was being restored and it was a new day for them to receive and follow their scriptures in new ways.

This is a good lesson for us today as we could also benefit by heeding Ezra and Nehemiah's guidance to hear the words of our scriptures being read and explained, not with lamentation (although the quality of the current teacher may be causing you weep silently right now) or with sorrow for all that you have failed to do or have done incorrectly in the past, but with joy, for the sacred writings of our spiritual ancestors can reveal for us today fresh wisdom from God that when followed can lead us to experience more goodness, wholeness, and peace.

It was in that spirit of seeking for a reading and teaching from God's word to offer good news that Jesus in his day read and taught, as we heard in our lesson from the gospel of Luke, which tells of Jesus' first actions after hanging up his tool belt for good and beginning his time of ministry as he went to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth and to read from their scriptures. Following the tradition of the day, he stood up in the synagogue as he read aloud from the book of Isaiah a passage about God's anointing and sending of one who would announce the good news that God is at work liberating people, releasing captives, setting free the oppressed, healing bodies and spirits, and bestowing favor upon all. He then sat down, as was customary for teachers to do while offering instruction, and he explained that the long-hoped-for, glorious day of Isaiah's prophecy had begun.

Now, it should be noted that in Jesus' reading from Isaiah and teaching from it, he very conspicuously left out a line from the text about the day of liberation that it would also be "the day of vengeance of our God." Perhaps it was Jesus' choice of emphasizing the mercy and grace of God for all and not the vengeance or wrath of God against some that caused those who heard Jesus that day to be astonished by his teaching (and, as we will learn next week, to challenge it and to drive Jesus out of town).

But a merciful and gracious reading of the scriptures, one that emphasized that God was actively doing wonderful new work to liberate people, led Jesus to boldly do his work of proclaiming good news and enacting good news by healing, feeding, and otherwise serving.

If only Jesus' followers would continue in his tradition, focusing less on God's wrath and vengeance and more on God's mercy and grace and using our sacred writings not as weapons to harm those who disagree with us or differ from us but as healing and hope-giving words, we would be blessed and the whole world would be blessed. Like the folks gathered in Ezra and Nehemiah's day, we would turn our weeping for our losses and past failures -- and the perceived failures of others -- into laughing as we celebrate with joy the new day of God's restoring work that has dawned among us and in us. And we and our world would experience more of the goodness, wholeness, and peace that God desires for us and all of creation to enjoy.

So let us continue Jesus' tradition of finding and sharing good news from our scriptures. May we always seek and welcome the life-giving word of God into our hearts, and may it be like an ever-flowing spring that gives living waters to our spirits and to others through our own welcoming words and healing deeds. This day and always, let us celebrate our still-speaking God's gifts of fresh revelation with joy. Amen.