

Good News
Epiphany 3 2019
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Nehemiah 8:1-12, Psalm 113, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Luke 4:14-21

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

I asked Peter to read the lesson from Nehemiah (8:1-12) because somebody had to read all those difficult names, and I thought Peter might be just the man. It may be hard for us to grasp the full picture of the lesson when we hear it. That text gives us a picture of what is happening here this morning

The people are gathered. Ezra mounts a platform and reads the word above them, so they hear the word coming down from the mountain or the heavens. This is why, in most churches, the front of the room is elevated, and you climb steps to read the word and teach the word. When the people heard the word, they bowed and said, Amen, Amen. Today when we hear the word, we say, Thanks be to God. Levites are designated to instruct the people about what they are hearing, and the service culminates in prayer.

We are modeling that same pattern. It becomes the pattern of the synagogue pattern. This same pattern is in our Gospel reading. Jesus enters the synagogue and as was his custom, he reads a passage from the scroll. After he reads the passage from Isaiah, he says, "Today this Good News has been fulfilled in your presence. He actually references the Year of Jubilee, which is the year when all debt are paid. The Year of Jubilee is like a new beginning. This is really Good News.

When we hear the word Gospel or Good News, how do we understand it? How does it relate to us? How is it Good News? Sometimes the good news sounds pretty bad, the way we sometimes hear it or think about it, and sometimes our perception of the good news is bad. We may think God is angry with us, and if we don't straighten up, he's getting ready to knock us down or do something terrible to us. That is sometimes how it appears that good news is being read. I thought we might just rehearse a little bit of the history of Israel this morning just to help us to think about the Good News in relation to today's reading.

Let's start at a very bad time in Israel's history. We start with one of the late kings, King Manasseh. He's the son of King Hezekiah. Manasseh is one of the most wicked kings the nation has ever had. He leads the whole nation in wickedness and revolt. When I say wickedness, it's not simply a matter of drinking too much and getting drunk or something. It means enslaving people in sexual violence, oppression, and the ruling class are crushing the people. The land is filled with idols. The Hebrews were called to bless the world but they have become more vile than Sodom and Gomorrah. They lead the world in wickedness. And so their time as a nation is coming to an end.

It is truly a time of judgment, but judgment is still a mercy, because the oppression is coming to an end. When a wicked oppressor is in power, it's a mercy when judgment comes and he's removed. That's the place where Israel is approaching. But first, there will be a great revival in the land.

Manasseh's grandson, Josiah, turns out to be the most righteous king that ever ruled Judah. The Books of the Law were rediscovered, and some of these had been lost for much of Israel's history. Josiah responds in repentance and a call for national prayer and a great Passover celebration. Scripture says there never was a king before or after who was righteous in all his ways like Josiah (2 Kings 22:2). Though he was the most righteous king that the nation ever had, his goodness and his righteousness, cannot stop the coming destruction. It's already in motion. The nation will be removed. Eventually, God allows Babylon to invade. After the first invasion, King Nebuchadnezzar takes 10,000 people captive.

This includes many of the ruling class. This includes Daniel, of Daniel and the lion's den, his friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Also, Ezekiel, a young man who was destined to be priest. Instead, Ezekiel will become one of the great writing prophets in Babylon. In this group of 10,000 people there are metal workers and all sorts of skilled professionals. This group is made up of the ruling class and the skilled craftsmen. Then Nebuchadnezzar sets another one of Josiah's descendants on the throne. These captives include the righteous and the unrighteous, the faithful and the unfaithful.

While these people are taken captive, simultaneously, Jeremiah, remains in Jerusalem. His role is to call the people remaining in Jerusalem back to God. He also tells the people to submit to this judgment of God through Babylon.

They don't heed his warnings. I've been reading Jeremiah over the last year with my nephews, and it's probably one of the saddest, most depressing books in the Bible, but it does have some optimism. Every week we read it together, and then their first response is, "Man, that's really a sad, depressing chapter". And yet Jeremiah promises that God will not forget the people in captivity. Though the faithful suffered alongside the unfaithful, he will not forget them. The Lord speaks through Jeremiah and says, "I will set my eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up. I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord, and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart." (Jeremiah 24:6-7)

God has not forgotten his faithful ones, he will bring them home, and he will rebuild Jerusalem. It will appear to get worse before things get better.

After 11 years, Nebuchadnezzar invades again, and this time, he just kills most of the remaining rulers, and he destroys the Temple, he levels Jerusalem, and they literally salt the land so it can't produce food. They ruined it intentionally. The only people left now are the very poorest of society, and Jeremiah stays there. Eventually, a handful of them go to Egypt, and they force Jeremiah to go with them.

This, in one sense, is a very sad story, because it's the end of Jerusalem, it's the end of the city that was supposed to bless all the nations, everything is coming to an end, and it appears they'll never be any hope again, it's completely destroyed. It makes you think about the people suffering, especially all these righteous people that are suffering in Babylon, many of who were killed.

As we think about the faithful ones being taken captive and many suffer, we can think about all the suffering righteous ones today. Many Christians are suffering throughout the world in prison.

But not simply in prisons. Many righteous people are suffering in broken families, broken relationships, broken bodies. There's all sorts of difficult situations where the people of God suffer and often wonder if they've been abandoned. We can hear hope in these words of Jeremiah that God is faithful and he will not abandon his people in their suffering, he is present with them, which is really ultimately the story of Jeremiah. He is a man who sees the end of the world, so to speak, and he says, though your world's come to an end, God hasn't forgotten you, he will resurrect you, which is the whole image. It's may not be visually clear to us, but that's the whole image of what happens to Israel. They die, they go into captivity. Basically, they're buried in Babylon, and the nation comes to an end.

But then they resurrect. They come back from the dead, and a nation is reborn. That's the reading from Nehemiah that Peter offered this morning. The exiles that have returned home. They're the resurrected ones. They've come back to life. You can see how this story's anticipating the story of Christ.

Isaiah, earlier, prophesied to the returning exiles, and he says,
Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
 that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned,
 that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins. (Is 40:1-2)

It's almost like he's repeating that word over and over, Comfort, Comfort, Comfort, Comfort my people. Isaiah encourages those who feel abandoned, even those who were sinful, God has made a way of forgiveness and redemption. The words of Isaiah has comforted struggling people all across the ages. It is good news that God does not abandon us in our suffering. In life we suffer as a result of the actions of others and we also suffer as a result of our own failures or choices. The Lord does not abandon in our pain.

Earlier this year, we read Psalms 72, which is a psalm celebrating the King of Peace. And it's most likely written for King Solomon, and it has this vision of a Kingdom of Peace that will bless all the world. You see a vision of what Israel could be. But Solomon doesn't fulfill that promise. As a matter of fact, Solomon, although it is peaceful during his reign, he ends up introducing idolatry and the seeds that will lead to the end of Israel.

I would suggest Psalm 72 helps give an image to the word of Good News that Jesus shares in today's gospel reading. He is telling us that this long-awaited kingdom of peace and righteousness has come. In today's story, Jesus walks into this synagogue and he reads the Torah passage,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
 because he has anointed me
 to proclaim good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
 and recovering of sight to the blind,

to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Lk 4:18–19)

This Good News is bringing to all the nations. To help us hear that good news this morning, I'm just simply going to read Psalms 72. Think about our world right now, think about our lives, think about the struggles at home and abroad. Think about all these rulers around the world that are oppressing people. Think about just all the grief and pain in our world, the terrorism, the pain, the fear. When Jesus brings the Good News, he brings the hope of God stepping into the middle of human sin and brokenness. If we think of Good News in light of Psalms 72, this is the promise of God that this is what's happening to the people of God. When we pray, the rule of Christ is being extended. And this is what his rule will ultimately look like around the globe.

¹ Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to the royal son!
² May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice!

Here's a word of hope for those seeking justice, those excluded from justice, those suffering at the hands of the powerful. True justice is established in Jesus Christ. The Biblical image of the poor is not limited to finances. It is poverty of family. Poverty of community. Poverty of soul. Sin has made us poor and only God can restore. When he steps into the poverty of our lives, there is cause to rejoice. The Psalmist continues,

³ Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness!
⁴ May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the children of the needy,
and crush the oppressor!
⁵ May they fear you while the sun endures,
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations!
⁶ May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth!
⁷ In his days may the righteous flourish,
and peace abound, till the moon be no more!
⁸ May he have dominion from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth!
⁹ May desert tribes bow down before him,
and his enemies lick the dust!

Think of the deserts, the Middle East, the rulers of these nations, even the terrorists, bowing down before the righteous Lord.

¹⁰ May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands
render him tribute;
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts!
¹¹ May all kings fall down before him,
all nations serve him!

Think of the leaders of the nations bowing down. Every knee must bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, Jesus is King.

¹² For he delivers the needy when he calls,
the poor and him who has no helper.

¹³ He has pity on the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.

¹⁴ From oppression and violence he redeems their life,
and precious is their blood in his sight.

He has pity on the weak and needy, he saves the lives of the needy from oppression, from violence. Think of all the places of violence in our world of slavery, all sorts of pain, he redeems their lives. Even now he's doing that in our world, often through righteous agents, sending his people out into the world to fight places of oppression. The precious is their blood in his sight. Even those who suffer now, he's fully aware of their suffering. It's precious to him. He hasn't abandoned them.

¹⁵ Long may he live;
may gold of Sheba be given to him!

May prayer be made for him continually,
and blessings invoked for him all the day!

¹⁶ May there be abundance of grain in the land;
on the tops of the mountains may it wave;
may its fruit be like Lebanon;

and may people blossom in the cities
like the grass of the field!

¹⁷ May his name endure forever,
his fame continue as long as the sun!

May people be blessed in him,
all nations call him blessed!

¹⁸ Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.

¹⁹ Blessed be his glorious name forever;
may the whole earth be filled with his glory!

Amen and Amen! (Ps 72:1–19)

I would suggest, when Jesus walks in the synagogue, he says this good news is being fulfilled in your presence, this is the good news he's talking about, this is the kingdom that is being established. It has not been fully unveiled. It was beginning to be unveiled then and continues to be unveiled, and there is a promise it will be fully unveiled. Every eye will see and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, that this good news will go from nation to nation. This morning, we celebrate this good news, we celebrate him gathering us into the good news. We're here because we've been gathered up into the good news. We've been gathered up into the kingdom, and so we've come to worship the king. But he also sends us out as his emissaries, as his peacemakers, as his people who bring healing, who have healing in our hands and our words, healing for the broken, the poor, the outsider, those who struggle. We are sent out as healers and restorers.

And so our New Testament reading, which we will think more about next week, we'll continue

in the Corinthians passage, he raises up the people with gifts, all sorts of gifts, and we as a people are called to reveal his glory in the world. Actually, Ephesians goes so far as to say, in the cosmos, everything in creation, all powers, behold the people of God and what he's doing. It's a glorious mystery. So today we hear the good news afresh, and we rejoice, even as those in Acts, when they heard the good news. 3,000 ran down and received it. Ezra, as they heard the good news, they said, Amen, Amen, and Nehemiah said to go out and have a day of feasting. So we will feast today, as a matter of fact, eat together, those who can, and we'll celebrate the good news of Jesus Christ that's being revealed in our midst and even in the people around us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.