

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10 and Luke 4: 14-21: New World Order

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.

Accordingly, 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. He 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.

And 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. Then 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.

So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And 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. Then 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."

In case you're wondering what the Watergate has to do with ancient Israel, the passage you just heard comes from the time of the rebuilding of Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity, several hundred years before Jesus' time. After the Persians defeated the Babylonians, the Persian kings allowed the captive Israelites to return to their homeland in waves, under different leaders including Ezra and Nehemiah. Ezra led the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple which had been started by Zerubbabel who was a leader in the first wave of returnees. Then Nehemiah followed with the rebuilding of the city wall of Jerusalem, which was vast and had many gates, among them, the Water Gate. The square in front of the Water Gate was an area where all people, even those who were ritually unclean could gather. You heard the emphasis on ALL, who had ability to understand. You'll see why.

I think we can appreciate that rebuilding the temple and the whole city destroyed by an enemy force decades ago must have been difficult, but they did it. Now that the external structures have been renewed, it was time to renew the people, and that proved to be even more of a challenge.

For a whole generation, the people had been divided and scattered. Not all Israelites had been taken into captivity, and those who were had experienced different cultures and brought some of that back with them as they returned to a world that was not exactly as they

remembered. So, Ezra and Nehemiah were in charge of a community of fragmented identity. Internal disagreements threatened the community's future. A new World Order of a sort was needed for this new chapter of their life together. What were they to do?

That's where we found them at the beginning of the passage Suzanne read to us. And here is the interesting thing, and I think it's the God thing; I mean, the work of the Spirit. Ezra and Nehemiah were no prophet in the traditional sense; they did not come down on the people with the word of God from on high. But it came from the people. It says, "All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. *They told* Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel."

Something, or someone moved the hearts of all those people to remember and seek the one thing that gave them their identity, uniting them as a people despite the differences in their cultures, opinions, and experiences, the Torah, the Law of Moses which was the gift of God for the people of God. To reestablish the community in continuity with the past and in unity and hope for the present, people turned to one source that reminded them who they were as a people of this Covenant God and how to live as such.

Coming out of captivity, they were starting a new chapter in their life as a released people, but the precept for bringing an order to their new world turned out to be an old one, or rather, the *timeless* one, the Law of God. The Law as God's gift was to them, as it is for us today, a compassionate and merciful guide on how to live together in justice and joy.

So, Ezra read the Law of Moses as requested. And when they heard it, they were moved, literally, to tears. They all cried. Speculations abound as to why, but one thing is sure; they were moved. Some, perhaps by guilt and remorse for how far they had strayed from the path, forgetting the Law. Perhaps some wept for joy and with gratitude that, despite their failings, God in God's mercy was now drawing them back to belong to God once again. Still others may have felt God's loving kindness and compassion in the guidance embedded in the gift of God's Law. At any rate, hearing God's ordering of their World, for their own good, touched them at a visceral level. And when they understood, with the help of leaders and teachers among them, what the law required of them, their lives were transformed, individually and as a community. They saw the path forward together.

Ezra said to them, go your way rejoicing and share the abundance you've been given with those who do not have it, for that's what God's holiness requires: to be merciful. Do not be sad, for you have the joy of the Lord for your strength to do what the Lord requires of you.

Now, fast forward 500 years or so, we meet Jesus in the very early days of his ministry as told by Luke. After Jesus was baptized, along with all the people, the Holy Spirit descended upon him and affirmed him as God's beloved Son. And the same spirit would send him into the wilderness to be tested. Today's reading begins when Jesus has just returned from the wilderness. Hear now the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to **Luke 4: 14-21**

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 16 When 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, 17 and 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 the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' 20 And 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. 21 Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

After living as a son of Joseph in Nazareth for all those years, Jesus embarks upon a new chapter in his life. Empowered by the Spirit, Jesus begins his ministry as a beloved Son of God. Just as the Israelites rebuilding the new community turned to the Scripture to remember who they were in God, Jesus, too, turns to the Scripture of God's timeless word, to proclaim who he is in God and what he has been sent to do for God.

The scroll of Isaiah was given to him to read, but it is Jesus who selected the portions to read. Then, after reading he sat down to teach, and said to them, "Today, the scripture is fulfilled...in your hearing." That he read from the Isaiah is deeply meaningful, because it was for that Anointed One, the Messiah, the people had been waiting for. No wonder eyes of all those present were fixed upon him.

Today: on Day 1 of Jesus' public speech recorded in Luke, Jesus declares who he is: God's anointed, the Messiah, sent to the world to do God's bidding, to carry out God's agenda, if you will. He is the spirit of the Law that had guided God's people now appearing in flesh.

And what does the agenda include? 1) To bring good news to the poor, 2) release to the captives, 3) recover sight to the blind; 4) let the oppressed go free, and 5) proclaim the year of

the Lord's favor, the Jubilee Year, is a time of mercy and grace, when the fields are allowed to rest, debts forgiven, slaves were set free.

These are the stuff of God's New World Order, where each life is a life of abundance, freedom, and wholeness, living in the safety of community filled with mercy and grace. That's also the life the Law of Moses is meant to ensure. Jesus came to fulfill it.

Our understanding of God's agenda, revealed in and by Jesus Christ, will be the driving force that shape our day-to-day life of faith, just as the Law of God did for those Israelites living into a new chapter in their life. Jesus understood what his mission was in shaping the world according to God's idea of world order. And all this Jesus said, having been filled with the power of the Spirit. Then Jesus gave *us* the Spirit, and we have the Scriptures of Old and New to teach us and help us understand what is ours to do as Jesus' emissary in the world, today.

His ministry in the Spirit as the one anointed by God called him to be an agent of mercy to the downtrodden in this world, and so will we be. The Spirit-filled Jesus told all gathered, "Today, the Scripture was fulfilled 'in your hearing'." So, it is as we hear these words of the Scripture today, and every day, in our understanding of them, we become part of the rebuilding of God's world in fulfillment of the Scripture, by the power of the Spirit.

We are living into a new year, in the world that has been forever changed by the appearance, the epiphany, of the Divine Love in Flesh. That walking Love of God is on the move now. We are living into a new chapter in our life together as a people of God, moved by the same spirit that filled and empowered Jesus.

Today, there is much confusion and disagreements about the way of living and being, within our country and in our relationship with the world. No matter how chaotic our surrounding may become, we have this proclamation by Jesus to be reminded of what we are to do, to walk the path the star of Epiphany shows before us.

A more literal translation of the last line by Jesus goes like this. "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears." Keep these words of Jesus from the Scripture in our ears and therefore in our minds, so we are moved by the Spirit and hear what is ours to do, and know in our body, viscerally, when to do it, in God's ever new and eternal World.

Amen, amen.