

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

8:1 All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel.

8:2 Accordingly, Ezra the priest 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.

8:3 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.

8:5 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.

8:6 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.

8:8 So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

8:9 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.

8:10 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."

### **Luke 4:14-21**

4:14 Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region.

4:15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

4:16 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,

4:17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

4:18 "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 set free those who are oppressed,

4:19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

4:20 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.

4:21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

### **Sermon Good News**

Fifty years of exile. Fifty years! And then one day, a scattered people came home. Not to the home they remembered. The original temple was long gone. So too, the landscape of their youth. It was like an entire culture had been erased. Such was the method of Babylonia – absorb and discard your neighbors.

But Persia had grown strong. And while it'd be a stretch to proclaim them any less violent or dominant than their Babylonian predecessors, they did allow the conquered to worship their gods and rebuild their temples.

So the people of Judea gathered just outside the Water Gate. And they read their sacred scriptures aloud. Yes, the law, but also the stories of the faithful people that had formed them; the stories of God's consistent presence, protection, generosity, and compassion.

This is one of the more profound moments in the history of Israel. The entire nation, in an open, accessible space, sharing the stories of their faith in a way that all can hear, understand, and embrace. It's the very definition of faithful, intergenerational community gathered in mind, body, and spirit.

Unfortunately, it's only for a fleeting moment.

Here's why. When Babylon sacked Jerusalem, she carried off her best and brightest, youngest and strongest. And she left the weakest and most vulnerable to subsist in a barren land. When the exiles return,

they consider themselves to be the “real” Jewish people. And they consider the ones who inhabit the land they have returned to, Moabites, Ammonites, and Arabs – people who’ve kept the land for two generations – to be foreigners, to be threatening, to be less than.

So begins a chapters-long assault on mixed marriages. Be wary, very wary, sons, of foreign women with their foreign ways and foreign Gods. It’s from this very unjust movement that we receive protest literature, including the story of Ruth, a Moabite, and grandmother of King David. Reminders that God loves, works through, and celebrates all people, especially foreigners.

Fast forward another 500 years, and we meet Jesus, newly-ordained, and returning to his hometown of Nazareth. And it’s another beautiful moment! Jesus picks up the scroll of Isaiah, a voice who could see past the disappointment of exile, and toward a horizon of hope.

And Jesus, with a confident and compassionate voice proclaims:

"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 set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And Jesus reminds his hometown that in this very moment, in his presence, the scripture has been fulfilled.

For a fleeting moment, the people are pleased. What a wonderful thing to have a prophet among them! What a wonderful thing to once again experience God’s full presence in the world!

But Jesus soon makes clear that while he is *from* Nazareth, he is not exclusively *for* Nazareth. His work is not to be hoarded, nor confined. He must continue to other places, serving other people, sharing this same good news with every neighbor.

And the people of Nazareth are filled with rage. How in the world can God be big enough for *them* and *us*?

I'm struck by the similarities of these two stories. How often we long for the promise of good news! If we can just make it to the day such news arrives, oh then you'll see! Everything's gonna be okay!!!

And then, somehow, when that good news arrives, we struggle to both receive and share it.

This good news is too good, too small, too fleeting. We must grasp it, seize it, own it. Otherwise, we'll lose our chance!

And therein lies the problem. God's good news isn't something that we can grab ahold of, and shake at other people, as if to say, "we've got it, and you don't!" Rather, the opposite is true: God's good news grabs ahold of us.

It sets us free from worries of scarcity and smallness. It opens our eyes to see, really see, one another. It frees us from a reliance on domination, on systemization, on weaponization; it invites us into a spirit of cooperation.

But I believe, more than anything, the arrival of God's good news refuses to be grand. We keep waiting for pomp and circumstance. But good news, just like divine kinship, breaks into ordinary moments.

In our living, we love one another, and wound one another, and forgive one another, and reconcile with one another, and repeat the process over and over again. We live with an urgency to advocate for God's justice – that is to personify love for our neighbors and our God; we are buoyed in this process by a grace that mends our shortcomings; we are bound in a hope that our next moment will be more profound, more purpose-filled, more divine than the last.

And yes, I long for the day when we can stand together outside the Water Gate, or when a modern prophet unrolls the sacred scroll in our presence. But we needn't wait on good news, Millbrook. It has arrived. It has been fulfilled. And our living must reflect this reality.

May we be found faithful. Amen.

### **Choral Reading:**

The heavens are still proclaiming God's handiwork.

**Isaiah foretells the promise of release, of sight, of freedom, of good news, and now.**

Nehemiah and Ezra remind us that the joy of the Lord is our strength.

**Jesus of Nazareth proclaims the fulfillment of scripture in our hearing.**

The Apostle Paul asks us to consider that we are the body of Christ, and individually, members of it. And collectively, we are caretakers for one another.

## **What will we do with this good news?**

Is this an opportunity?

## **Are we being called into a moment of truth?**

What might be fulfilled by our gifts?

## **By our faithfulness?**

By our love and service?

## **By our attention to what's really newsworthy?**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

**Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.**

***Let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O LORD, our rock and our redeemer.***