

Epiphany C3
January 24, 2016
“God’s Powerful Word”
Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair
David Noble

Nehemiah 8:1-10

8All 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. ²Accordingly, 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. ³He 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. ⁵And 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. ⁶Then 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. ⁸So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

⁹And 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. ¹⁰Then 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

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When 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, ¹⁷and 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 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 let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And 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. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

1.

In some ways, over many years and many generations, the Bible had become just another book—a good book, a book with fine ideas and full of tradition and history, maybe even a book they thought was their favorite book, although the word that book contained had become unfamiliar to them. Now the people in Jerusalem were in a pickle and they realized that the book they no longer knew so well was the book they needed. They believed that book had a word they needed to hear right there, right then.

So the people gathered at the gate to the city- children sat on the laps of their parents, men and women sat side by side not separated as they would have been in the temple, and Jews as well as non-Jews stood side by side under the gate as the book, the Bible, was brought forward.

In fact, the people had demanded this. They ordered Ezra the priest of the new temple and Nehemiah, the governor of rebuilt Jerusalem, to bring the book and read it to them. What a giddy experience for a priest, a preacher, to have his congregation demand he read the whole Bible to them and preach on it as he read it! Everyone’s attention was riveted all day on the reading and the preaching until the book was done.

Now there’s a group of people who could have been Presbyterians! They were in the world’s first New Beginnings Program. They had just been released from captivity in Babylon, had just rebuilt the temple and their homes and the city wall, and now it was time to lay the foundation for their new community, how they would live side by side. They were ready to hear how God’s

word would lead them into new ministry and mission, and so Ezra brought the Scriptures, he opened to the first page, and all the people stood up to honor what they were about to hear—God’s word, God’s holy and profound word.

2.

I was at a preaching seminar last fall with Dr. Long, my preaching professor from seminary. His latest book on preaching reminds me of Ezra and the people and their reintroduction to the Bible. Dr. Long believes that preachers can no longer assume that congregations today will know the stories or people of the Bible and preachers will need to find ways to connect the dots more than they used to.

Rather than be led into ministry by Scripture, churches have been relying instead on their collected wisdom, their logic. Scripture is not often discussed in committee meetings or at leadership councils. The Spirit, who interprets scripture when it’s being read, seems distant or ambiguous. The power to make decisions has been human power. And that power is not enough to lead churches in ministry.

Here at Central we’re involved in our own New Beginnings Program. Like Ezra and his people we are entering into a new time. God has caught our attention, has inspired us to renew our ministry and set out on a bold journey to be God’s people for this community.

We will make many decisions not only this winter and spring but in the years ahead about our new ministry together. As Presbyterians we have a heritage of turning to God’s word, reading it, listening to it, being nourished and transformed and motivated by it. But what difference will that make? What does our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition give so much importance to God’s word?

3.

Ezra opened the Scriptures and the people stood. Then they settled into a long day of reading and preaching. And the people cried. They heard the scriptures and they cried.

No one knows for sure why they cried. Perhaps they heard words of warning, words that their parents and grandparents had ignored, resulting in their exile in Babylon. Then again, perhaps this congregation at the gate heard words of hope and grace that overwhelmed them, and these were tears of joy.

But whatever it was they were feeling, whatever was behind those tears, it was God’s word that provoked it. The word of God is powerful. God’s word captured their attention for a day’s worth of listening and they were reconstituted as God’s holy people. God’s word began to shape them once again into the community God wanted to minister to the world, to be a blessing to all people.

God’s word was put into the hands of Jesus one day in his hometown synagogue and he read from the prophet Isaiah and said he was the fulfillment of that word. God’s word was coming true through him. And the people rose up from their seats that day and drove Jesus out of the synagogue to the edge of a cliff. The Word is powerful. It provokes a response – sometimes it

encourages and sometimes it convicts. But the Word of God is powerful when it is set loose in the world.

God's Word is not only powerful, it is aimed squarely at creating a community through whom God's Spirit will work God's will in the world. God's word reshaped the community at the gate where Ezra read all day. That community committed itself to being God's people once again. The Word provoked a loyalty to God's original desire, that God's people be a blessing to all the world. That day was a new start for that objective.

In Nazareth, when Jesus stood to read, he proclaimed a new day to, a new beginning when captives would be released, and good news would come to the poor, and that it was going to happen through him. But the community that day was not ready to hear the Word of God and it came to them as a judgment.

4.

God's Word is no different with us. As we study thhhat Word in Wednesday Bible study, as we study it in short lessons after coffee hour, as we open it and read it in small groups and youth groups and Sunday School classes for children, as we read it and discuss it in session meetings, in Tuesday morning staff meetings, and youth group mission trips and retreats, as we read it and preach on it together at Sunday worship—in all these ways we are opening ourselves to the power of God's Word that is going to provoke a response in us.

Some days God's Word will confirm what we thought- it will assure us that we are in fact doing the right thing, that we are building our community a God wishes. And at other times reading and preaching and concentrating on God's Word will annoy us or confront us or accuse us, and we will have to reconsider what we thought was the right thing to do or be. God's Word is powerful.

It isn't just another book. God's Word is alive through Jesus Christ, through his Spirit, and it intends to shape us as a community as well.

There's a wonderful writer named Annie Dillard who wrote tongue-in-cheek about this. She said,

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. *For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.*”¹

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 40-41.

We have a powerful ally in our new beginning. God's Word keeps working, building communities that bring good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, and a jubilee year of God's favor to all. Put on your crash helmets, God's Word is at work.