

Sermon: With Interpretation

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

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Based on **Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21**

As we have said before, we often need some context in order to interpret what's going on in a given reading. Today's passage from Nehemiah is a good example since we hardly ever read from that book, but even the Gospels insist that we know what the writers and their audiences knew or else our interpretation is incomplete.

As we heard in the first reading, Nehemiah was the governor and Ezra was the priest and scribe. The Babylonian Exile had come and gone, and (almost) everyone had come back to Judah and Jerusalem. Nehemiah took on the responsibility of rebuilding the city, including building or repairing a retaining wall which later became known as Nehemiah's Wall which still stands today; chapter 12 describes the wall's rededication. It was Ezra's job to rebuild the faith community.

Rebuilding the city kept everyone busy because there was a lot to rebuild, but the Exile created other problems that Nehemiah and Ezra were still dealing with almost 100 years after the Return, including recreating a distinctive Jewish identity in Jerusalem and repairing the cultural damage caused by the Exile.

Today's reading deals with the community's lack of Torah knowledge, which, ordinarily, would be a given in a Jewish setting. The Exile itself had only lasted 50 years, but the effect was long-lasting, and it affected those who stayed differently than it did those who were exiled.

In the months and years following the destruction of the Temple, the non-elites who stayed behind began to forget their sustaining rituals. You can't offer up a sacrifice to God when there is no place to do it. Most of the priests had been sent off to Babylon, so if even one altar had been left standing, there was no one to conduct the ritual anyway. Over time, the people stopped doing the things they had been doing their entire lives, and, as the generation began to die off, so did their religion.

Meanwhile, in Babylon, the exiles realized that even though there lived among them priests and scribes, they too had nowhere to gather, nowhere to sing. After the Return, the people's collective ignorance proved that their history had undermined their faith. It was the Persian king who gave Ezra the task of teaching God's laws to 'those who do not know them' (Ezra 7:25).

In Babylon, the exiled Jews experienced cultural pressures to give up their national and religious identity. The Temple had previously been the center of all Jewish worship, and now it was destroyed.

Psalm 137 records a lament of this era. It begins in a familiar way:

By the rivers of Babylon –
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.

And verse five reveals a worry related to the now-destroyed Temple:

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!

The exile made a big impression on the Jewish psyche. In this period, they adapted to a new reality and a new way to experience God, and that's when we see the rise of local synagogues as centers of worship. Nearly 600 years later, in Luke, chapter 6, Jesus meets a man in a *synagogue* whose right hand was withered. The implication is that the man had forgotten how to praise God; he had been separated from God for too long. And that's how it was for Nehemiah and Ezra's community.

It doesn't take long to forget your history. In 1960, New North closed for ten years. When we reopened, we were no longer a Unitarian church, but it was hard to say exactly what kind of church we had become instead. Somewhere along the way, the clock stopped working and the bell no longer tolled the hour.

Today, we're a Christian church still finding our way in a community that barely remembers us. We had renters here last year who had no idea there was a church on the other side of the space they rented. King's Chapel in Boston has the same problem: people think it's a museum, not a working church. Like the people living in Nehemiah's Jerusalem, we're trying to interpret who we are now even as we try to translate who we were then. We have one advantage over Ezra though: we never forgot Zion.

It turns out that Ezra reading the Torah to all the people went a long way toward restoring their relationship with God and their neighbors. And they wept, for various reasons. Perhaps they wept because they realized what they had been missing, or maybe they felt joy for having finally entered into the presence of God.

The essentials of the story are these: Ezra, standing on a raised platform, read the first five books of Scripture – the Torah – to all the people from morning ‘til noon. And the people stood with Ezra as active listeners, interacting with him as he read. Moving through the crowd were some Levite priests who helped translate and interpret the Word for the people, so that all could understand. Interpretation helps with comprehension.

At the end, Nehemiah said, ‘This day is holy; eat, drink, and be merry; and *share God’s gifts* with the poor and the foreigners, all those ‘for whom nothing is prepared.’ Holiness includes enjoying God’s gifts as well as sharing with those who have nothing.

Now, the scene in Luke of Jesus reading Scripture is similar to the scene in Nehemiah: someone handed the scroll of Isaiah’s writing to Jesus, who stood to read from it, as Ezra did. But Luke has Jesus read only one specific verse from Isaiah, familiar words that his audience would know described the Messiah, except that Jesus left off the final phrase, the one about proclaiming the day of vengeance. Jesus was here to focus on bringing healing and justice, not vengeance.

The verses Jesus read are part of a larger, continuous section that begins, ‘Your people shall all be *righteous*; they shall possess the land forever. They are the *shoot* that I planted, the work of my hands, so that I might be glorified. The least of them shall become a clan, and the smallest one a mighty nation; I am the Lord; in its time I will accomplish it quickly’ (Isaiah 60:21-22).

Most of the people who lived in Nazareth were members of a Hasidic sect who expected a Hasidic Messiah. The word *Hasidim* literally means ‘righteous ones.’ They called themselves *Nazoreans* from a Hebrew word that meant ‘shoot,’ like the one the Lord planted. So, hearing this passage from Isaiah must have been very exciting for those who heard them, and Luke confirms it in the very next verse: ‘All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”’ (Luke 4:22). Everybody loved this kid. Then he told them that they would not be part of his mission, which enraged them, and made them want to kill him.

Jesus said, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled.’ Today, not tomorrow or next week or next month, but today, in your hearing. His mission is clear but not specific. He leaves it open for us to interpret who are the captives and what kind of release to them he proclaims; who are the blind and what kind of sight he will restore to them. Across the Roman Empire, some scholars estimate that between 70 and 90 percent of the population could be classified as ‘poor.’ They could stand to hear some God-given, grace-filled, transformative good news, and Jesus will bring it to them.

We sometimes assume that all Christians are familiar with the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation but Scripture is not self-explanatory. We read, we interpret, we discuss, and we apply the lessons of the Bible as best we can to transform ourselves into something more than we are now, but we can’t do it alone. There are many things we can do alone – praying, for example – but being a Christian is not one of them. Being a Christian means worshiping God as part of a faith community. Scripture – especially the Torah – instructs us in how we can best live together.

New North Church has a long and unique history and an exciting future. Muhammed Ali once said that the future is a mist and that is probably as it should be, and it will take all of us to discuss and decide how we can best serve the wider community beyond what we already do in our outreach ministries.

Jesus said there are two commandments. The first, he said, is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:29-30). We can call that Sunday worship. The second, he said, is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). We can call that ministry, or service, or simply being human.

The only question is, how can we best do those things, if we are to be a holy people enjoying and sharing God’s extravagant gifts?

Amen.