

**Sermon: 2019/01/27 (3rd Sunday after Epiphany, Year C),
Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; and,
Luke 4:14-21_BTR**

[Invite children to the front.]

Do you remember that a couple of weeks ago, I told you about the prophet Isaiah? He lived for a very long time during a period when Israel was in a *lot* of trouble: firstly they were attacked by Sennacherib, king of the Assyrians; and then by Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonians!

He took Isaiah and the (other) Israelites into "captivity" - which means he kidnapped them.

And transported them far away from their ancestral homeland to live in a very poor condition in Babylon.

Well, Isaiah prophesied that God wouldn't leave them there for too long: He loved them too much even though they deserved their punishment as sinners.

And, sure enough, in time, the Babylonian empire collapsed, and the Israelites - the Jews - were able to return.

One of their leaders was called, "Nehemiah."

He packed up all of his stuff [pick up and zip suitcase] said "Goodbye!", and took a very long walk across the (hot) deserts of Iraq back to Israel.

And do you know what the first thing that he did when he finally got back home?

He started building the *Second* Temple in Jerusalem.

(The first one - Solomon's - had been destroyed.)

And whilst the builders were making ready, digging the foundations - and moving all the rubble - they found 'the book of the law of Moses'.

This was very exciting.

The Jewish people had lost so much - so many of their most precious treasures.

And they had forgotten what it looked like to be a "Jew." - a person of the Old Covenant.

So, Nehemiah 'gathered together' 'all the people' and asked a friend of his - "Ezra" - to read it: [8:1f.].

This book is in the Bible - we know it as, *Deuteronomy*.^[n.1]

And the people were very shocked to hear what it said:

It said things like -

Don't eat pork: *Oops!* [Remove from suitcase and throw away.]

Don't eat badgers. *Hey* now, that's good advice. [Remove from suitcase and throw away.]

Don't eat jellyfish. More good advice! [Remove from suitcase and throw away.]

Don't eat owls. *Even more good advice!* [Remove from suitcase and throw away.]
Don't shave your beard. *Oops!* [Remove from suitcase a razor, throw away.]

Now some of those prohibitions might not make much sense to you, but 'the book of the law of Moses' didn't stop there:

[These next items lift up and then replace back into the suitcase.]

It *also* said:

Give at least *ten* percent of all your money to the worship of God.

(That's called the "tithe.")

It said be nice to slaves.

And return lost property to the rightful owner.

Keep your campsite tidy.

Marriage is for life.

Look after the poor.

Don't lie; and especially not in a court of law!

And these are all *great(!)* things to show that we love God and He loves us.
Which is why when "the people" heard these (sensible) laws they said: "Amen, amen" [8:6], meaning "Hooray, yes."

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

'Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee...'

Returned?!

From where?

Our gospel reading's beginning begs the question, doesn't it?

Well, some of you may know and some of you may not: don't worry this isn't a test.

But the fact of our having got as far as only chapter four this morning is something of a giveaway - and we'll be following Luke's account for most of the year.

"Galilee," of course, was the region in which Christ was raised - so this is a homecoming that is described.

And His absence had certainly been a mystery - it appears - to those who knew Him as a younger man in Nazareth.

But not to us: *He was in the wilderness* - in the desert east of the River Jordan in the (modern) country of that name; the very same desert that Nehemiah, Ezra and other children of Israelite exiles crossed centuries earlier. He had been there, some speculate, being mentored by John the Baptist, who was a "fellow traveler," *but certainly* it was His "residence" - the location - for 'The Temptation'.

- an event that the Church postpones for your hearing until the First Sunday of Lent. (That's March 10th - the start too of our (additional) 8am Rite *One* services.)

That period of trial - those 40 days - were, for Jesus, of little consequence. More on that later.

It was really only a curious sequel to an earlier episode that *was* of importance - *huge* importance: Jesus' immersion and the descent and "anointing" of the Holy Spirit.

This empowering of the Holy Spirit now equipped Him to prove - *to demonstrate* - His *unique* Sonship - His one being of the Father, 'begotten, not made.' Which is to say, "equipped" Him to *assert* His *unrivaled* authority to say - to *prescribe* - what is right and what is wrong; to *define* holiness and, conversely, the profane.

Who else would dare?!

Only God... or an arrogant *false* prophet.

And it is with just these *two* options in mind, that the men and women of Nazareth saw Jesus stand in the synagogue 'on the sabbath day, *as was his custom*' [v.16] - a *clear* encouragement to regular church attendance - and heard Him quote - *selectively* - from 'the scroll of the prophet Isaiah'. [v.17]

And it is significant that it isn't a *verbatim* regurgitation.

Go check it out yourself.

Put *Luke 4*, verse eighteen through nineteen alongside *Isaiah 61*, verse 1 and two. And you'll notice that Jesus stops short - in the middle of a sentence, in fact. And that's because He - Jesus - represents not merely more of the same - a continuation of the status quo, *but a genuinely new direction*:

A new direction of *grace* rather than law.

A new direction of *love* rather than 'vengeance' [Is. 62:2b].

These things - these qualities; these values - were *always* there, but the Incarnation - and the Cross, especially - brought them into *sharp* focus; into the center.

They *displace* the older structure *but don't* replace it.

Think of it as a swapping of places - of a couple dancing - a waltz or something, where one had been leading and then suddenly, seamlessly, allows the other to do so.

Or think of a photographer composing a "shot":

One detail moving to takes its place in the foreground and the other now moving to the background.

This isn't supersessionism, *but evolution*; of "fulfillment" - to paraphrase our Savior.

A new chapter that begins 'today' [Lk. 4:21] *whenever* we decide to adopt Jesus' priorities - His mission.

In theory, we did this at our baptisms - but explicitly in confirmation.

But at every moment there is the onus - forever renewed - on each individual

Christian to *actualize* - to make real and observable - the grace of Heaven: 'to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind'.

Fred Hall
Tanya Hall

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. See: Baker, David W. and Alexander, T. Desmond (2003), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 68.