

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10  
Luke 4:14-21

Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Midway Presbyterian Church  
January 27, 2019

## **A Prophecy Fulfilled**

### *Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson*

Our Old Testament Lesson for this Third Sunday after Epiphany is taken from the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah is the central figure, and the book contains some of his own records. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445 B.C., during the period following the Jewish Exile. Nehemiah is named governor by the king and leads the people in rebuilding the wall and gates of Jerusalem. He assures them of God's protection and proclaims their need for faithfulness in keeping the Mosaic Law and in worship. Listen to these words from Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, and 8-10...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

In our Gospel Lesson from the fourth chapter of Luke, we hear the beginning of Jesus' Galilean ministry. He returns to Nazareth where he had been brought up and goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath, standing up to read from the prophet Isaiah. Listen to these words from Luke 4:14-21...

### *Sermon*

In some books it seems that the author has no clear purpose in writing, other than to sell the book. But no such charge can be made against Nehemiah, who assured the people of Israel of a new day, or against Luke, who gave us the Gospel which bears his name. The beloved physician knew why he was writing, and he was obviously confident about his work.

Many of the first generation of Christians felt a marvelous confidence about the way of life they had chosen. Though the four Gospels and some of the epistles are quite different in style, they have one common characteristic—that quality of certainty.

There is no wondering, no hesitancy, not even a reasonable caution—rather a grand note of assurance. In writing to young Timothy Paul says,

For I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. (2 Timothy 1:12)

Such assurance is remarkable when we consider the circumstances in which the early Christians lived. Some of them had seen Jesus discredited in the series of trials. Some had seen him mocked and beaten and spit upon, and then reduced to an apparently helpless, dying form, hanging on a cross. You and I may envy the people who actually saw Jesus--the Word become flesh. Perhaps though their faith was more tested than ours; for they also saw Jesus with all the marks of humanity and suffering that we tend to forget.

Yet through it all, they believed, with such assurance that they could turn the world upside down. How? What was their secret?

Part of the answer is made clear in the latter portion of our lesson today. As Jesus explained Scripture for the first time to the people in his hometown of Nazareth, he spoke from one of the most cherished portions of the prophet Isaiah--chapter 61, verses 1-2:

“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,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus Christ is the servant of God who will usher in the liberation and the restoration associated with the proclamation of the year of Jubilee in Leviticus 19 and 25. Then rolling up the scroll and handing it back to the attendant, he sat down in the manner of a rabbinical leader and declared:

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (4:21b)

“Today this scripture is *fulfilled*...” The first Christians and the Gospel writers saw Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy. They had studied the prophets, heard the Scriptures expounded by their rabbis, and waited for One who would fulfill the great expectations. Now they could spread out the prophecies of the Scriptures alongside their experience with Jesus and conclude that they matched. Jesus was the fulfillment of Isaiah’s vision. For Isaiah displayed great expectations of good news of deliverance to captives and to the poor, comfort and consolation for the brokenhearted. And in Luke 4, Jesus claims in his ministry the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophesy.

But he was more than the *fulfillment* of prophecy. If that were all we could say about our Lord, he might become to us no more than a kind of mystical novelty. But Christ is also the fulfillment of our *human longing* and *need*. For he is the way, the truth, and the life.

The Christian faith has been conveyed to us in the Scriptures, and we cherish and honor them. The Scriptures provide a lamp to our feet, and a light to our path. (Psalm 119:105) As our new Elders will affirm in their upcoming installation:

We accept the scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to us. (W-4.4003)

We are grateful that we have the Bible as a written record to instruct us in the faith that saves. But great as the Scriptures are, they might not convince us if it were not for Christ’s fulfillment that we have seen over the centuries, in literally millions of human lives. And more than that-- if it were not for the fulfillment you and I experience in our own lives by the work of the Holy Spirit. Epiphany proclaims that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of human longing and our need. He is the Light of the world. He is *our* light.

What is the longing in *our* lives which Christ has filled in the past? More importantly, what is the longing he would fill today? What is the hunger in our hearts? In what ways are we restless? In our scripture Jesus says:

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The someday of hope can be the today of fulfillment—as it was for the people of Jesus’ day, for millions since, for you, for me, and for others throughout the world.

But let me ask this: to what degree are *we* fulfilling the Scriptures in the lives of others? Those who have known the glory of Jesus Christ are called and sent to extend his blessing to others. To be the salt that savors. (Matthew 5:13) To be the light that leads to assurance.

When we hear that Jesus came to bring good news to the poor, liberate captives, give sight to the blind, uplift the exploited, and proclaim God’s grace, let’s not forget that we are called to this same work today. To give an example of how we carry forth Christ’s mission, consider Good Neighbor Cupboard on South Townes Street in Anderson. This organization provides emergency food to people who are in need of help due to loss of job, extended illness, or natural disaster. Or there’s the Chapel and Mercy Center on South Main Street, which provides food and fellowship, worship and Bible study, housing and employment assistance. Both of these groups we’ll support through our Souper Bowl of Caring contributions next Sunday.

Robert Dannals has said that in Latin America Christians envision the kingdom ruled by Christ as a place filled with singing, dancing, and feasting. They believe the first responsibility in that kingdom is to allow God to turn the water of sadness, anxiety, stress, and emptiness into the wine of new life. As they begin the new year, they invite each person in the community to make a fresh start. But it is not enough to have your own water changed into wine. A second

feature is that you must seek the same for others. And so the welfare of others, their station in life, comes into focus. The least, the lost, and the last of one's community are not forgotten in Christ's kingdom.

Madeleine L'Engle, beloved American writer of young adult fiction, including *A Wrinkle in Time*, once said in an interview:

The point is to be ready at all times to give and serve what God has given us, to manifest God's glory by reaching out with the ordinary...to manifest God in your own givenness through everyday opportunities. It may be that turning six jars of water into wine will be your given task, but I doubt it. On the other hand, it could mean turning your jar of peanut butter into sandwiches for the homeless, or turning your voice into corporate praise on Sunday morning.

Jesus' words in Luke 4 echo verses from Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6, as a description of who he is and what he is about. They form what we might call his mission statement. The current mission statement of Midway Presbyterian Church is found in our bulletin, the first part of which reads:

Our purpose is to call people into a living and growing relationship with God in Jesus Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit, and to promote the mission of Christ in compassionate ministries.

In the winter of 1947, the abbot Pierre, who was known as the modern Apostle of Mercy to the poor of Paris, found a young family on the streets one night. They were homeless and destitute, nearly frozen to death. He gathered them up and brought them to the monastery, which was already full of other poor and outcast. As he looked for a place for their makeshift beds, there wasn't room in the regular rooms, so the abbot took them to the chapel. He promptly removed the reserved sacraments from the altar area and placed them in an unheated attic. He placed the family's bedding on and around the altar. The other monks expressed shock at such irreverence. The abbot replied, "Jesus Christ is not cold in bread and wine, but he is absolutely cold in the body of a little child."

To be sure, it is easy in these post-Christmas days to lose the spirit of Christmas. The Christmas decorations have been packed away for another year. Christmas mail has been answered, and all that seems left of Christmas is reckoning with the money spent. And it may be hard to concentrate on the joy of giving, which seemed so important a few weeks ago, for now we've got not only bills, but taxes to deal with. Even though this is the Epiphany season, when we recall the visit of the wise men and their giving of gifts to the Christ Child, our own disposition may be more in the mood of, "Let's get on with our normal routine."

Well, if we're to get on with the normal, let us do so not by leaving the meaning of Christmas behind. Let us remind ourselves that our Lord came to bring hope to hopeless people. And you and I can be agents of this good news. Some of it we can do through the church, some of it we can do through charitable agencies, and some of it we can do personally, one on one, as we extend kindness, love, and deeds of thoughtfulness. And those people in need may be closer than we sometimes think. They may be sitting right here with us in Worship. They may live in our own homes, go to our own schools, work in our own stores and offices.

Luke knew why he was writing. He wanted others to know with blessed assurance the fulfillment which had come to all humanity in Jesus Christ. So let us go forth into this week with this same blessed assurance. And the same willingness to be a blessing to others...through the Spirit of Christ our Lord. In that way, we too will fulfill the scriptures.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.