

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

Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year C
Midway Presbyterian Church
January 23, 2022

Blessed Assurance

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

Our Old Testament Lesson for this Third Sunday after Epiphany is taken from the eighth chapter of the book of Nehemiah. This chapter records the story of the reconstituted people of Israel following the exile. There is to be joy over the rediscovery of the Word of God. 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. There he stands 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 Luke, who gave us the Gospel which bears his name. They knew why they were writing, and they were obviously confident about their work.

Luke dedicates his account to one "most excellent Theophilus," a common name for a high official in the Roman government. Theophilus can be translated, "God's friend." Thereby can Luke's writing gain access to a wider audience. And in God's providence, it turns out that we today are included in that audience.

Luke says that he has carefully studied all these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth—all that he began to do and teach (Acts 1:1a), and now he feels qualified to “write an orderly account.” He may have felt uniquely qualified, as a Gentile and a physician, to offer insights which others might overlook. And perhaps more than anything else, Luke wanted his readers to “know the truth” about the whole story of Jesus. Luke wanted to provide the certainty of those things in which Theophilus had been instructed.

Though the four Gospels and some of the Epistles are quite different in style and emphasis, 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 the which cause I also suffer these things: nevertheless I am not ashamed: for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day. (2 Tim. 1:12)

Many of the first generation of Christians felt a marvelous confidence about the way of life they had chosen. Such assurance is remarkable when we consider the circumstances in which they lived. For they took their stand with Jesus at the peril of their lives. Some of them had seen him 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. Some lived under the threat of persecution and death. 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)

Anointed at his baptism, 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 that we read about in Leviticus 19 and 25. Having read from Isaiah, Jesus then rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant, and then sits down in the manner of a rabbinical leader and declares:

“Today this scripture sees its fulfillment, as you sit listening.” (4:21b)

The first Christians and the Gospel writers saw Jesus as the fulfillment of scripture, the fulfillment of Isaiah’s vision. For the prophet displayed great expectations of good news of deliverance to captives and to the poor, comfort and consolation for the brokenhearted, sight for the blind. And in Luke 4, Jesus claims in his ministry the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophesy.

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)

Rose Schrott Taylor, Interim Associate Editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*, wrote in a recent article:

What a miracle the Bible is. Beyond the God-breathed stories, I’m talking about the physical book. Imagine all the hands that have touched these texts over millennia. The scribes, bent over poor candlelight, tracking words on one papyrus with one hand while they copy the text with their other hand on a new, clean sheet. The dusty, dark rooms that scrolls were kept in, and sometimes forgotten about (as we see when Hilkiah finds the Torah in 2 Chronicles 34:14-16). The stories of ancestors that were told around the firelight, whispered into ears of sleepy children, and proclaimed over meals that, eventually, were written into a narrative. The Bible is a miracle.

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 the lives of millions of people. And more than that—if it were not for the fulfillment that 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.

So what is the longing in your life and mine 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 our hearts restless? Do we long for peace, hope, love? For a purpose in being? For assurance that there is a home prepared for us in heaven? My friends, just as Jesus Christ fulfilled the scriptures, he can fulfill the longing in our hearts and lives.

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 of the world.

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. And we carry forth Christ's mission in support of 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 the ministry of Meals on Wheels, which provides person-to-person contact and compassion. For some it will be the only contact of that nature that they experience most days.

The French priest, Abbé Pierre, was known as the modern Apostle of Mercy to the poor of Paris. In the winter of 1947, he 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. To which the abbot replied, "Jesus Christ is not cold in bread and wine, but he is absolutely cold in the body of a little child."

And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'
(Mt. 25:40)

It is said that in Latin America Christians envision the kingdom of Christ as a place filled with singing, dancing, and feasting. They take the noun "king" and turn it into the verb form "kinging." They believe the first responsibility of kinging is to allow God to turn the water of sadness, anxiety, stress, and emptiness into the wine of new life, just as Jesus revealed God's glory in turning water into wine.

As they begin the new year, they invite each person in the community to make a new 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. So the second aspect of kinging is to seek the welfare of others, to increase their station and joy in life. It means to have direct responsibility for the least, the lost, and the last of one's community.

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. 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 our normal routine, let us do so by making normal the true meaning of Christmas. Let us remind ourselves that our Lord came to bring joy to the world and hope to hopeless people. And you and I can be agents of this good news. Some of it we can do through the church; 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.

Yes, 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. Therefore, let us, you and me, 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.