

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, January 24, 2016
Rev. Andrew Reid
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 119; Luke 4:14-21
“Scripture fulfilled”

Two events. Similar in some ways, different in others.

The location of the first event: the square beside the Water Gate in Jerusalem.

The location of the second event: the synagogue in Nazareth.

The occasion of the first event: a service to celebrate the fact that the people of Israel were settled in their homes in their own land once again.

The occasion of the second event: a service of Sabbath worship.

The first congregation: the people of Jerusalem, *both men and women and all who could hear with understanding* Nehemiah 8:2.

The second congregation: the people of Nazareth, separated by gender of course, as they always were and still are in the synagogue.

The date of the first service: the first day of the seventh month, shortly after the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, when the fifty-two day reconstruction of the walls of Jerusalem was completed.

The date of the second service: not specified, beyond the fact that it was the Sabbath.

The moment in the first service: the reading of the Law, from *the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel*, a reading that lasted *from early morning till midday* - Nehemiah 8:1,3 - and I hear all about it if the sermon lasts more than 15 minutes. And that was just the reading: then, believe it or not, came the sermon: *they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading* Nehemiah 8:8.

The moment in the second service: the reading from the prophet Isaiah. It may have been the set text for the day, or it may have been the preacher's choice: we do not know. This would normally be followed by a sermon or homily, but it was a very brief sermon or homily this particular Sabbath, running to only nine words in English: *‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’* Luke 4:21.

The leaders of the first worship service: *Nehemiah, the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people* Nehemiah 8:6.

The leaders of the second worship service, probably not the only leader, but the only one we are told about: not a priest or a scribe, not even a formally recognised rabbi, but a young man who had grown up in the community.

And the reaction in both places - oh, such a reaction!

The reaction to the reading and the preaching in the first service: *all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen', lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground . . . all the people wept when they heard the words of the law Nehemiah 8:7,9.*

The reaction to the reading and the preaching in the second service: *The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him Luke 4:20.* The eyes of all in the synagogue in Nazareth that day fixed on Jesus. They may have been amazed by what he said. If the story ended there, that might be the only logical conclusion to draw.

But the story doesn't end there. For some reason, the Revised Common Lectionary chooses to divide the story of Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth into two, and spreads it over two Sundays. And so we will return to the second part of the story in our Gospel lesson next Sunday. And there, we will see rather a different reaction starting to emerge. A reaction of shock.

But let's stop where today's text ends, with the eyes of all in the synagogue fixed on Jesus. In amazement *at the gracious words that came from his mouth Luke 4:22.*

Amazement at such a young man preaching so boldly. After all, he was someone they knew - he was Joseph's son, the carpenter's boy. For goodness' sake, hadn't they all known him since he was so high? He was a local boy, and now he was becoming a celebrity. Just look at him now, all grown up and mature, going around the neighbourhood, teaching in the synagogues in the towns and villages round about and winning the praise of everyone who listened to him.

And here he is today, back in his hometown, reading from the prophet Isaiah - it's chapter 61 in our Bible - and proclaiming that *'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'* He's our boy, and we are proud of him.

The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. In amazement. Could it have been amazement at Scripture fulfilled? Scripture - satisfied. Scripture - accomplished. Scripture - realized. Scripture - completed. In some way, all that this Scripture predicted and prophesied came about, simply as Jesus read the text. Because all he did was read it.

Could that really be enough to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed? Could that be enough for the year of the Lord's favour to be proclaimed?

Well, all it took for the world to come into being was for God to speak God's creative Word. Think of the pattern we see repeated in Genesis 1: *And God said, 'Let there be . . . ' And there was . . .*

It was the same time and again with Jesus. A woman begged Jesus to heal her daughter. When he seemed reluctant, she argued with him that even dogs get the crumbs that fall on the floor. And

when Jesus said, *'Let it be done for you as you wish.'* Jesus spoke the word, and it was: *her daughter was healed instantly.* Matthew 15:28.

A blind man wanted to see. Jesus said to him, *'Go; your faith has made you well.'* Immediately he regained his sight . . . Mark 10:52. Jesus spoke the word, and it was.

A gale blew up on Lake Galilee, and the disciples thought they were about to perish. Jesus *woke up and rebuked the wind and the raging waves; they ceased, and there was a calm* Luke 8:24. Jesus spoke the word, and it was.

Jesus told the wedding servants in Cana to fill jars with water and pour it out. He didn't do anything more than speak, and the water became *the good wine* saved till last - John 2:9-10. Jesus spoke the word, and it was.

There is power in the spoken word. We all know, we have all seen, we may have experienced in our own lives, how words can build up, strengthen, encourage. But we also know, we have all seen, we may have experienced in our own lives, how words can break down, belittle, debilitate. There is power in the spoken word.

How much more power, then, is there in the Word of God when it comes directly from God, or from the lips of Jesus, or from the Holy Spirit working in the minds and hearts of God's people - working in your heart and mine?

What was it the Psalmist said on the matter?

⁷*The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul;*

*the decrees of the Lord are sure,
making wise the simple;*

⁸*the precepts of the Lord are right,
rejoicing the heart;*

*the commandment of the Lord is clear,
enlightening the eyes;*

⁹*the fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring for ever;*

*the ordinances of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.*

¹⁰*More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;*

*sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.*

¹¹*Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.*

Psalm 19:7-11