

In Nehemiah, all the people gathered together in the Temple. In Luke, the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon Jesus. In both passages, there was the focus, a desire to hear and understand the sacred words and stories of faith that are now contained within the holy book we call the Bible. They knew, and hopefully we know that these sacred words are to be taken *seriously*, but *not literally*. Not literally, but seriously.

Luke tells us Jesus had been filled with the power of the Spirit, and had gone to the synagogue, preparing to teach those who had gathered. And all were anxious to hear what he would have to say about this familiar passage from the prophet Isaiah. They had heard it read many, many times before. But they had never heard this well-liked teacher interpret it. And they were confident that he would bring a new interpretation, different from any they had heard before. And they were certainly right, but could never have imagined just how new and different it would be!

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He proclaimed that he was the one who had come to bring justice, to bring freedom and release, to proclaim the year of Jubilee. Jubilee was to be practiced in the 50th year. Debts would be forgiven, land would lay fallow in order to recover, those who had been unjustly imprisoned or oppressed would be set free, and the beloved community of God would function as God intended them to. Jesus announces that that time has come.

This would not have been received as good news for everyone -- especially those who were owed many debts or were in positions of power and wealth. Likely the same would be true if such a thing were announced today. We certainly see that lived

out in resistance toward universal health care, the power struggles with Wall Street, and the inequity in education and opportunity due to race and economics.

And yet it IS good news for everyone because while Jesus is in fact addressing the unjust systems of the day, he is also announcing that he has come to set all of us free -- free from sin, free from our past, free from whatever has power over us: greed, drugs and other addictions, fear, abuse, selfishness, hopelessness, or whatever.

He has come to open our eyes to the truth; open our eyes to the injustices of our day; open our eyes to our own poverty -- the poverty in our spirits, and the poverty of our brothers and sisters -- both real and tangible poverty, and the poverty in their spirits.

As I said, not everyone sitting in the synagogue would have heard this as good news at every level, but if their eyes were fixed on him and their ears were attentive to him, then something that he said would ring true for them. Many likely did feel drawn to this teacher and many would come to have faith in him as their Savior. Those words of Isaiah had new meaning that day when embodied in the person of Jesus. Suddenly they were hearing this familiar passage again as if for the first time.

But it must be said that by the end of his teaching Jesus will have made them so angry they are ready to throw him off a cliff! And there are times when we read or hear a passage, as well as an interpretation of it that confronts us, or challenges our belief system and we are so angry that while we may not want to throw him off a cliff (although maybe the preacher or teacher!), but we do want to dismiss it, or argue about it, deny it, or just not want to hear it at all. That's when we really need to be listening and allow Jesus to speak to us, to reveal new understandings and new truth, to work on us, to

change what needs to be changed in us, and to sanctify us until we are a true reflection of him. To hear and understand and respond and surrender and act as his words and actions direct us.

Now we turn back to an earlier part of the story of our faith. In Nehemiah, the people of Israel had just returned back home to Jerusalem after being in exile. They came home to find the Temple in ruins, their homes destroyed, the whole city looking like the scenes we see on television these days of cities leveled by war or natural disaster. And now in this chapter, all of the people who had returned home, rebuilt the Temple, and began to create a life after exile, gathered together not by invitation of the governor or of the priest but by their own initiative. And they told, not requested, but told Ezra the priest to bring the law before the assembly and read it to them. Men, women and children stood – STOOD --for about six hours listening to the reading of these sacred texts. They were hungry to hear the law -- the words of the covenant between God and them as a people.

They had heard these words many times. And those words would always remind them who they were as God's chosen people. But when they stood and listened to them being read for hours, the people heard them in a new way. Because they were at a different place in their lives.

They had had experiences that caused them to hear the law differently than when Moses first presented it to them. Or even how they understood them before they were taken into exile. Their life experiences affected their interpretation of and connection with the sacred words of Scripture. They had been through any trials. They

had grieved many losses. They knew what it meant to be in bondage, and knew what it meant to be set free. They knew what it meant to hold on to any glimmer of hope, to feel hopeless, and then to have hopes fulfilled. They had strayed far from God and had lost their way. Their faith had been tested, but still they found a way to hold on. They were in so many ways different people. And so as they listened to the priest read those sacred texts, they wept. They wept for what was lost, for what they had done, for God's faithfulness and covenantal love. They wept simply for the beauty of the words. They would in time also weep for joy. They were hearing those sacred words again as if for the first time.

And it is true for us, as well. Our life experiences influence how we understand and interpret scripture. It is only when such sacred stories and teachings speak to us in our current circumstances -- whether it challenges, convicts, or clarifies; inspires hope, brings peace;
gives us joy which gives us strength;
opens our minds to new understandings,
our eyes to see the world as Jesus does,
our hearts to new or deeper relationship with the Lord,
or in some way moves us -- that it is relevant to our lives. And the amazing thing about Scripture, and even more so about the Spirit that is at work within us as we read and hear and understand it, is that sometimes the same passage can speak to us in many different ways at different points in our life's journey. Sometimes they even cause us to

weep. The Spirit will help us discern the truth contained in Scripture when we read the sacred words not literally, but seriously.

That is when we hear these sacred stories of our faith again and again as if for the first time. That is when they have the power to transform us. Thanks be to God.