

III Epiphany C 2022 (January 23) (Service)

Prelude (“Sor Blanca Maria” by Bonnie Rideout)

Welcome to our pre-recorded service for January 23, 2022, the Third Sunday After Epiphany. I’m Pastor Curtis Aguirre. Bob Park is the musician.

Let’s sing the hymn, “God Created Heaven and Earth” #738 in the Evangelical Lutheran Worship books, but we will sing it to the melody of #816, “Come, My Way, My Truth, My Life”.

- 1. God created heaven and earth, all things perfect brought to birth;
God’s great pow’r made dark and light, earth revolving day and night.**
- 2. Let us praise God’s mercy great; for the Lord in hope we wait;
God who fashions all that lives, to each one a blessing gives.**
- 3. God’s rich grace beyond compare saves us all from death’s despair.
All earth’s creatures, small and great, praise God for that blessed state!**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all... And also with you.

Let us pray.

Blessed Lord God, you have caused the holy scriptures to be written for the nourishment of your people. Grant that we may hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that comforted by your promises, we may embrace and forever hold fast to the hope of eternal life, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and 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.

So, they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Holy word, holy wisdom... Thanks be to God!

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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)**

**That, to me, is one of the most interesting statements in the book of Nehemiah. In the verse just before this, which was not included in the pericope for today, it also says, "...the Levites helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places."
(Nehemiah 8:7)**

I find this so interesting because it is the first time in the Bible that we see something that today we take for granted, namely, a group of people functioning as teachers or interpreters of a written text so that the people gathered can understand what the written text means. In this case that group of people are the Levites, the members of the priestly clans who are also responsible for maintaining the regular worship and sacrifices in the Temple.

What we see here in Nehemiah is a significant shift in the religious life of the people of Israel. To understand this shift and its significance for us, let me give a little background.

The events in our reading took place about 515 years before the time of Jesus, in the early decades of Persian rule over the land of Israel. The Persians were the ones who had defeated and conquered the Neo-Babylonian Empire. The Neo-Babylonians were the ones who had conquered Judah, destroyed the city of Jerusalem with its Temple, and taken the upper echelons of Judahite society—the nobility, the scribes, the artisans, and the priests—into forced exile in the city of Babylon. For seventy years the people who were the carriers of the laws and religion of Israel lived in exile in Babylon. Only farmers, day labourers, and slaves were left behind in Judah.

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When the Persians conquered the Neo-Babylonians, they gave permission for the Judahite leadership to return to Judah and rebuild Jerusalem if they wished. Some took up the offer, but many did not, because, after seventy years, we're already talking about the second, third, and fourth generations, born in Babylon, whose only knowledge of Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem came from the stories their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents told. For the generations born in Babylon, Babylon was home. In fact, Babylon would remain a key Jewish centre of learning and culture for another 900 years.

At any rate, those Babylonian Judahites who did return, found that the common people of their ancestral homeland had little knowledge of the laws or religion of Israel, and were even losing their traditional language, Hebrew. Many had intermarried with other groups who lived in the area, such that toward the end of the book of Nehemiah it says:

...half their children spoke the language of Ashdod (by this time probably a dialect of Aramaic), and they could not speak the language of Judah (in other words, Hebrew), but spoke the languages of various peoples (again, probably different dialects of Aramaic as well as Arabic). (Nehemiah 13:24)

By this time Aramaic had become the *lingua franca* of the Middle East and would remain so until it was displaced by Greek after Alexander the Great swept through the region. In the time of Nehemiah and Ezra, even the new Persian overlords of that whole region, who had their own language, used Aramaic to communicate with their new subjects.

So, Ezra and Nehemiah and the others who came from Babylon had the task of rebuilding Jerusalem, rebuilding the Temple, building walls for the security of the city, and encouraging more settlers to come from Babylon. And if that weren't enough, they also had to reintroduce the laws, the religion, and the language of Israel to the locals.

To facilitate all this, the Judahites who came from Babylon had something new to use as a tool for teaching: a single large scroll that we now call the

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Pentateuch or Five Books of Moses, what in Judaism is called the Torah or the Law.

Many modern scholars agree that what we now have as the first five books of the Bible were put (more or less) into their present form during the Babylonian exile by the scribes and priests and their descendants who had been forcibly removed from their homeland.

Before the Babylonian Exile, in the period of the kings and of Solomon's Temple, all this information probably existed in scattered form, in various scrolls and in oral traditions handed down from father to son among the Levites (see II Kings 22). When the original exiles were led away, they had probably taken with them what they could in the way of scrolls, and in their heads they carried the oral traditions of the Temple and of their people.

With Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed, and the leaders of the people in exile in Babylon, there was an urgency to preserve and collate what could be preserved, eventually leading some to pull it all together into a unified whole.

This unified whole was the "book of the Law" that Ezra read from to the assembled people in Jerusalem that day at the beginning of the Feast of Booths. But of course, the book was written in Hebrew, some of it in a very old kind of Hebrew that people just didn't speak anymore, that only the scholars from Babylon still knew how to use. So, for the sake of those who did not speak Hebrew and for the people who did but might have found the old Hebrew hard to follow, the Levites distributed themselves among the people and interpreted and gave the sense so that the people could understand it.

Three things are significant about this:

1) Before the Babylonian exile, whatever scrolls and practical traditions there were about the Covenant with God seem to have been stored at the Temple and used only by the priests and scribes, if at all (see II Kings 22).

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There does not seem to have been any kind formal instruction for the people.

This led to the situation in which both the people and their leaders lived in overt violation of many of the Laws of the Covenant. The people worshipped foreign gods, as has been corroborated by archaeological digs where we often find small idols at household altars from the period of the kings; and the leaders of the people ignored the compassion laws, gradually disinherit their fellow Israelites of the land that was supposed to be each family's and clan's in perpetuity. According to the prophets, it was for this reason that God sent Israel into exile in Babylon.

2) The recognition of this failing and of the need to provide education for the people in matters of faith and practice led to the newly collated collection of texts called the Book of the Law—in other words, the beginnings of what would grow into the Bible over the following 1000 years. We can also say that the religion of ancient Israel began to morph into what could be called early Judaism, because reading, studying, discussing, and teaching became important. Various movements would follow the example of Ezra and his Levites over the next centuries, one of these being the *Parushim* or Pharisees, who would develop the institution of the synagogue. The synagogue became one of the key vehicles for teaching, and in turn eventually became the model for the local church. In fact, the parts of our classic Christian worship where we sing, pray, hear readings and give commentary on the readings (the sermon) is based directly on synagogue services.

3) The other process that began at this point was reinterpreting ancient texts in changed social contexts. For example, the laws in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy assume a tribal and agricultural society where most people own their own land. But in Babylon, the exiled Judahites lived in one of the largest urban centres of that time. Even for those who returned to Judah, cities became more important and bigger. The land was owned by absentee landlords who hired day labourers and held slaves to do the work. The old titles to the land were lost or forgotten. It was a new world. The Law needed to be reinterpreted. Judaism has continued to do this reinterpretation with

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vigour, and we Christians have also done this but with a different emphasis, because of course we view the Old Testament Law through the lens of Jesus.

This scene out of the book of Nehemiah that we heard in the reading warns us not to think that any of us can simply "control" the Bible all on our own. We all need teachers, guides, interpreters. Of course, Jesus is our ultimate interpreter. But look at the New Testament and see what it's composed of: letters from Paul and the others, interpreting the Old Testament in light of Jesus, and discussing how to apply our faith in Jesus practically and faithfully.

It is human pride that tempts us to say to ourselves, "Well, I've got my Bible; that's all I need." When I write a sermon like this, I don't just make interpretations of the text based on my personal whim or whatever suits me. I turn to teachers, scholars, those who understand more than I do to see what they see. Of course, they don't all agree, so I look for overarching patterns and the general consensus. And of course, I also bring in my own faith and assumptions—how could I not? But my point is, we all need guides, teachers, interpreters, especially of texts written in languages none of us speak as our native tongue anymore.

And that is exactly the point of theology, teaching, and doctrine. The word "doctrine" comes from the Latin verb *docere* which means "to lead." Our words "duct," "conduct" and "conduct" also come from this word. Doctrine is meant as a guide, a lens on the Bible to help us interpret it faithfully.

In Lutheranism, we talk more about theology than doctrine. The reason is that doctrine tends to be set in stone, while theology has more to do with how we think about something. So Lutheran theology is less concerned with specific doctrines that you have to know, and more with how you think about the Bible, about faith, and about your life. In Lutheran theology, one of the key insights is that in Christ, God's mercy is greater than God's judgment.

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In Lutheranism the Bible is primary, but not as a flat document where all the parts are equal, but as God's chosen vehicle to bring Christ to us. As Luther put it, the most important parts of the Bible are "*was Christum treibet*," what brings or conveys Christ. The rest is secondary.

So, if there is a passage that troubles you because it seems to convey a cruel, impulsive God, don't worry about it. It isn't important. Instead, look for those passages that bring the good news of God's mercy in Christ. As God says in Isaiah,

See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare... (Isaiah 42:9)

and in Jeremiah,

The days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and Judah... (Jeremiah 31:1).

I hope that it can be said for us, as it was for the people who gathered that day to hear Ezra read and to have the Levites interpret:

All the people went their way to eat and to drink and to send portions (to the poor) and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them. (Nehemiah 8:12)

Amen.

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Let's sing the hymn, "Open Your Ears. O Faithful People," #519 in the Evangelical Lutheran Worship books.

1. Open your ears, O faithful people,
open your ears and hear God's word.
Open your hearts, O royal priesthood,
God has come to you.

Refrain

God has spoken to the people, hallelujah!
God has spoken words of wisdom, hallelujah!
God has spoken to the people, hallelujah!
God has spoken words of wisdom, hallelujah!

2. They who have ears to hear the message,
they who have ears, now let them hear;
they who would learn the way of wisdom,
let them hear God's word. (*Refrain*)

Let us confess our faith using the words of the Apostles' Creed.

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

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**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

Let us pray for all people according to their needs. I will end each petition with the words, "Lord, in your mercy," Please respond by saying, "Hear our prayer."

(Brief silence)

Holy Trinity, One God, you give the One Spirit to your Church. Help us to overcome our differences that your Church may be one. Lord, in your mercy... Hear our prayer.

God our Creator, you have made the world so that all life is inter-connected. When one part is harmed, all parts suffer. Guide us to care for this complex world that you have entrusted to us, and help us to see how we are all connected. Lord, in your mercy... Hear our prayer.

Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, you call all people to live in total love for God and for each other. Help us to overcome fear and hatred so that all the peoples of the world may live in peace. Give your wisdom to the leaders of the nations, especially now as tensions ramp up in Eastern Europe, and as ambitions of power threaten to drag ordinary people into war. Lord, in your mercy... Hear our prayer.

Holy Spirit, you are present with us even when we are not aware of it. Be present with those who are lonely in this time of pandemic, that they may sense your abiding presence and know that they are never alone, and inspire all of us to reach out to each other. Lord, in your mercy... Hear our prayer.

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God of healing, pray for all who are ill or suffering in any way, and name them before you...

(Long silence)

For all these, Lord, in your mercy... Hear our prayer.

We give thanks for the faithful departed who have come to know their fulfilment in you. Assure us also of this hope until we join them in eternal light. Lord, in your mercy... Hear our prayer.

Into your hands, gracious God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in the gift of your Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord who taught us to pray...

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever.
Amen.**

Benediction

**The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord's face shine on you and be gracious to you;
the Lord look upon you with favour and (+) give you peace.
Amen.**

Postlude ("Caballeria de Napoles" by Gaspar Sanz)