

Transcendence

- [Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10](#)
- [Luke 4:14-21](#)

Today is the only day in the three year cycle of readings that we get to hear from the book of Nehemiah. Yet it is important in telling the history of God's people, it speaks of regrouping and rebuilding after tragedy which is particularly important today, and it contains one of my favorite verses.

Nehemiah was a Jewish leader in the 5th century BCE. A small number of Jews had returned to Judea after the Babylonian exile. They were struggling to resettle the land and Jerusalem was still in disrepair, so Nehemiah, who was a cupbearer in the court of the Persian Emperor, went back as a kind of aid worker and led the rebuilding.

Nehemiah, whose name incidentally, means "God Comforts", did not just lead a major building project, but together with Ezra, he rebuilt the spiritual and ethical core of the people. In this reading we hear that the people gathered together to hear the reading of the scriptures in a prototype of synagogue worship on which our own liturgy is partially based.

He gathered the people together and Ezra, the scribe and priest, read from the scriptures, with interpretation, in other words with what we call a sermon and all the people worshiped God. They wept because they were so moved by the words of the scriptures, and by the sense of community and the presence of the Spirit of God in their midst.

This is what we are doing now. Often we talk about the importance of the eucharist, the sacrament of the Body of Christ, but this part of the service, the liturgy of the word is just as important and in Nehemiah we

hear that as our spiritual ancestors gathered together they rebuilt, not just the walls of Jerusalem but their common spiritual life, and they heard the word of God read and interpreted.

There's a similar event in the Gospel reading. Jesus is in his hometown synagogue and they hand him a scroll to read. A scroll of the prophet Isaiah. And Jesus chooses a passage, actually it seems that he mixes two together so maybe he read a bit here and there, maybe the scroll was not totally accurate or maybe Luke who was a wonderful poet, put it together so it sounds like poetry.

"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."

And when he had finished reading, he gave the scroll back to the attendant and sat down, which was the normal position for a rabbi to preach, and they all waited expectantly. And Jesus said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Not in your presence, not in your sight but in your hearing.

I don't learn well by listening and so I always like to be able to read the text. But could Jesus mean that just by hearing the passage based on Isaiah, some freedom happened, something was released? Could he mean that the hearing of the Scripture itself brought about a change? We saw that happen in Nehemiah.

Back in ancient Jerusalem, 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,.. 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 worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground...’ and ‘all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.’

All the people wept when they heard the words of the Law – this was a truly transcendent moment. They heard and they were moved.

In our Mutual Ministry Review, one of you said that it would be good to have more opportunities for transcendence than just in the music. That has had led me to ponder transcendence and the conditions necessary for transcendence to occur.

It’s a bit like playing golf.

I’m not a particularly good golfer. If I were playing competitively I would have given up a long time ago. But just occasionally, I hit the ball just right. I hit it like it’s meant to be hit. Everything aligns. It is a powerful and thrilling moment. And it keeps me going back. And wanting to get better so I have more of those moments when the wood hits the ball just right with the perfect sound and my body uncoils beautifully, and the ball flies through the air like an arrow straight for the pin.

That is transcendence.

But it doesn’t happen every time. I wish it would and so from time to time I take another lesson, from time to time I practice. I try to create the environment in which the astonishing, gloriously beautiful, drive will occur.

We all come to church for many reasons. But it is the moments when transcendence happens that we remember. And when it has been missing for a long time, we feel disconnected and think perhaps the Spirit is not in this place after all.

I cannot create transcendence for myself or for you. I cannot conjure up a moment of unitive consciousness. I cannot make goosebumps break out on my arms. But I think we together can create a worshiping community where transcendence happens. And I think we have, because we keep coming back. But it's much harder when you're sitting at home on your own watching the livestream; it's much harder when the church is half empty and we can't hug.

I want to suggest this morning that part of what makes a difference is our expectation. The folks in the synagogue at Nazareth had heard about Jesus and they were curious to see what the carpenter's son was up to. The people in 5th century Jerusalem were excited to hear what the scriptures told them. And in the hearing of the reading something happened.

We together create the space for transcendent moments to occur, for God to touch us tangibly and shift our consciousness, when we open ourselves to the possibility, when we come to the scriptures with expectation, expecting God's Holy Spirit to speak to us. For that is part of the work of the Holy Spirit, to interpret the written word so it becomes the living Word. How would it be if all of us came here with the hope that the Spirit would touch us in the reading of the Scripture? How would it be if whenever you arrived in the parking lot you had a sense of hopeful anticipation – what will happen today? What will I hear? How will God touch me?

There is a teaching story about a Buddhist disciple who was going with his master in the early morning to see the sunrise. "I'm doing everything I should, he complained but I'm still not enlightened" His teacher replied, "You can no more make yourself enlightened than you can make the sun rise." "Then what's the point?" he asked, and got the reply, "So that you will be awake when the sun rises."

It is when we are awake, open and expecting the blessing of God that God can most touch us because we are not full of ourselves and our own preoccupations, but are waiting on the Word of God coming to us in word and sacrament. And that is what keeps us coming back, and that is what will draw more people to worship God with us and serve God in this faith community.

Not because we have a great marketing plan, not because we serve the best coffee, not even because we have the most interesting conversations, but because God is here, because God is palpable in this place and in this community. This is what gives us life and this is what draws us close.

And then we get to celebrate. We get to celebrate because God is in our midst, because in finding God we are transformed and the Spirit of the Lord is upon us.

Oh, my favorite verse in Nehemiah? "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."

