

Hearing the Word of God

Scripture: Nehemiah 8:1 – 10 & Luke 4:14 – 21

Let us pray: Lord God, we are gathered here to listen attentively to your word. Help us understand what we hear so that the joy of the Lord may be our strength. We bless the Lord, our Great God! AMEN.

Let us be honest – many of us have a hearing problem! How many of you have a hearing aid; raise your hand? How many of you believe your spouse has selective hearing; raise your hand? I truly thought each wife here today would have raised their hand – notice my wife raised her hand!

Our first text is from the book of Nehemiah and it centers on the hearing of and the response to God's word. The hearing of the word of God from the scribe Ezra brings the people to tears to hear God's instructions again. When the people gather to hear the word of God, they have already strengthened their faith muscles. Those who heard the word of God that day were convinced they were capable of rebuilding a destroyed city. Thousands of families have returned to their ancestral homes. They have returned from the security they had learned in Babylon to the unknown future in Jerusalem to rebuild the city. In other words, the time was ripe for the Spirit of God to renew the people. The time was right for the people to commit themselves to do God's work. Is the time ripe for the Spirit of God to renew us? Is the time right for us to commit ourselves to do God's work?

Today I would like us to focus of the hearing of God's word. Does it bring us to tears to hear God's instructions? When we gather to hear the word of God, have we already strengthened our faith muscles? Do you think we are capable of rebuilding the church?

In Nehemiah passage, everyone listened attentively to the instructions given by the scribe Ezra. Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been built for the purpose of share scripture. He stood with many men of the Levite tribe on his left. The people saw Ezra open up the book as he stood above the people. They stood outdoor in a large crowd throughout the day as Ezra read the word of God. Their response to hearing God's word witnessed by Ezra was to raise their hands and say 'Amen! Amen!' Picture that – God's people heard Ezra read God's word and they raised their hands and said – 'AMEN, AMEN!'

(Act out, move in front of communion table) Picture this day - everyone was listening attentively to the instructions from Ezra. They stood outdoor in a large crowd throughout the day as Ezra read the word of God. They were focused on God's word. They were not thinking about what they were going to have for lunch. They were not thinking about what they were going to watch on TV that day. They were not looking in the sky daydreaming. They were totally focused on Ezra sharing of God's word!

Their response to hearing God's word witnessed by Ezra was to raise their hands and say 'Amen! Amen!' God's people heard Ezra read God's word and they raised their hands and said – 'AMEN, AMEN!' (return to pulpit)

They did this in a loud voice as the people of God. They then fell on their knees and put their faces to the ground. They moved from standing to an act of reverence from hearing God's word. They humbled themselves before God in worship. What a wonderful sight it must have been!

Having just heard those words about the people in Nehemiah's time, was everyone listened attentively? Here we are inside of this church, as we heard the word of God, is our response to hearing God's word witnessed by me causing us to raise our hands and say 'Amen! Amen!' Will we do this in a loud voice as the people of God? I do not expect you to fall on your knees and put your face to the ground. But let us move to an act of reverence from hearing God's word to raise our hands and saying 'Amen! Amen! Let us humble ourselves before God in worship. (Repeat until they respond)

In Nehemiah passage the people weep at what they have heard. We do not know exactly why they are mourning, but we can venture to guess based on our own experience of receiving profound truths with a willing and open heart. In other words, the time was ripe for the rebuilding and repopulating the city of God, Jerusalem. It was ripe within the hearts and minds of the people gathered there. Perhaps they finally understood that what they were contributing to Jerusalem's restoration was good, but what God was doing was greater still. The people were resilient but they needed new nourishment. God was renewing their faith. God invited them to celebrate and to feast. God was fueling them up for the work ahead.

We should also weep at what we have heard. We should mourn, but also rejoice in the profound truths of God and Jesus Christ with a willing and open heart. In other words, the time is ripe for the rebuilding and repopulating of this church. It is ripe within our hearts and minds to gather here each Sunday to worship God and his most Holy Son, Jesus Christ. Perhaps we will finally understand that what we are contributing to God's kingdom will restore the church. What God is doing is greater still. We must be resilient because we need nourishment. God will renew our faith. God will invite us to celebrate and to feast. God will fuel us up for the work ahead.

In our second scripture reading from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus stands up in the synagogue which would have been a common accuracy in Jesus's life. In fact, while I was in the Holy Land a few years ago, I visited Capernaum. This is a town on the shore of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus lived for almost three years of his adult ministry, over half of his adult ministry. He lived in Capernaum in Peter's house and Jesus would have often gone to the synagogue in Capernaum. On our visit there, we went to the ruins of the synagogue in Capernaum. The ruins of the synagogue did not have a roof anymore but the side walls, stone benches around the outside walls of the synagogue, and the raised platform with a stone table on it was in the front of the synagogue. They were still there. This table would have been the place that scripture would have been placed upon.

Our tour guide, Eli, talked to us when we entered the synagogue. He talked for about ½ hour, giving us information about the site and how the synagogue would have operated. There would not have been a priest assigned to this remote synagogue. Local scholars would have entered the synagogue and gone to the table and opened scripture up to read. Then they would have shared their thoughts and teaches on the scripture after have read it. Jesus was a well-known person of faith at this time, so Jesus would have stood in this synagogue many times in his three years living there.

After Eli spoke, we had time to wonder around the ruins. I made my way around the site thinking that my footsteps were walking exactly where Jesus walked. I finally made my way to the platform and stood behind the table. It was a very emotional time for me, in fact, a minister friend took a picture of me as I was behind the table in the synagogue in Capernaum. He asked me after taking the picture if I was crying? I said – YES! It is amazing that I was standing right where Jesus stood many times!

Now our scripture reading from the Gospel of Luke takes place in Jesus' hometown synagogue of Nazareth. Jesus chooses to read from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus reads this – *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 captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* Jesus proclaims that he was the fulfillment of scripture. How bold of Jesus! How very bold of Jesus to do this in his hometown where many knew him a small boy and young adult. The passage does not tell us about the response of those who heard the word of God in that synagogue from Jesus. Will they enter into the celebration and be transformed by the Spirit at work in the word of God? Or will they have neither tears or submission, but anger. Such anger will shut them out of both the feasting on the word of God and the revival of their very being. May we never have anger at hearing the word of God! May this not be so with us!

I want you to notice that there is a communal nature of the life of faith. The community in both passages today gather to hear the word of God. They pay special attention to the word of God and some of the people will be able to help others understand what they have heard.

This one of the most important parts of why people should gather and worship each Sunday. It is to fulfill the communal nature of a faith life and it is in the hope that some of the people who have gathered for worship will be able to help others understand what they have heard. If we hear the word of God, we will become intentional in gathering to form a community of faith where no one person is expendable and our faith in God and Jesus Christ will grow.

Let us pray:

O God, you have gathered us here as your body of believers in such a way that we live and love and become a true family. Your Holy Spirit unites us in such a way that when one suffers, we all suffer; when one celebrates, we all celebrate. Therefore, we lift up both the joys and concerns of our church family in this communal prayer. AMEN.