

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, January 26, 2025

The Third Sunday After The Epiphany

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner

on

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

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Jubilee Meloday

After the exile in Babylon, the Jewish people returned to Jerusalem to find the city in ruins. In particular, the wall and the Temple. If it had not been for people like Ezra and Nehemiah, they might have given up all hope. Instead, the Hebrew scriptures give detailed accounts of the rebuilding of the walls and the Temple in spite of some extraordinary opposition from those who had grown up in the desecrated holy city. Once the walls and the Temple were rebuilt, they were able to rededicate the Temple itself and resume worship.

Our first lesson today is a passage from the Book of Nehemiah but the compilers of the lectionary decided to omit two verses from the passage. Lectors will, no doubt, be grateful for that omission because one of the verses omitted contains a long list of Hebrew names. But these two verses are crucial to understanding the text – so let me read them to you: *“The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand.”* (verse 5) So, who were those people, and why was it so important that their names were recorded not once but several times? They were Levites. And what were these Levites doing standing with Ezra on the wooden platform? Well, the other verse that was omitted tells us...*“the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places.”* And as we heard, *“they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.”* How did the Levites help the people understand? Wasn’t a sermon by Ezra sufficient? The Levites used their particular skill to help the people understand; they **sang**. The Levites were musicians. We need to remember that the Priests and the Levites – the ministers of the Temple in Jerusalem were not just skilled in the cult of the Temple, as in the preparation and the offering of sacrifice, they were also musicians. They also participated in the Temple worship through making music. We read many times how the priests were skilled brass and percussion players; but the Levites had the gift of singing. They knew the songs of the faith; they sang psalms, and canticles, and acclamations and, most importantly, they sang from the scriptures – **they gave the Law a melody**. Just as happens in so many synagogues in this city each week, the Levites *sang* the scriptures to the people. They sang the songs of faith back to the people so that they understood the meaning again. You have probably heard the phrase attributed to St. Augustine; although it is debatable that he ever said it, it is a phrase that has resonated through the centuries: *“The one who sings prays twice.”*

Marty Haugen comments on a friend from Ghana, Sowah Mensah who described to him the role of the musician in African countries and how they have a particular role for those who, for whatever reason, had become estranged from the community in which they live. He said this:

They were the people [that is, the musicians] whom you went to when your life was in crisis – when your marriage was in trouble, when you were cut off from the community, when you felt lost and alone. I told him that in America, an artist or musician tends to be the last person you go to for advice about relationships (with the possible exception of a politician). Sowah said that the artist is the one who knows all the songs of the community – the songs of their history, the songs of their relationship and the songs of their vision. In his words, “The musician sings the song to you and ‘re-members’ you back into the community.”” ^[1]

My friends, this is exactly what the Levites did. By singing the songs of the faith, they helped the people understand the meaning of the Law.

And that is exactly what Jesus did in the Synagogue in our Gospel reading today. There, in Nazareth, in the synagogue where he grew up, – it is likely that he would have *chanted* the reading from the prophecy of Isaiah. We should pause for a moment and think about that. Jesus singing. We have other references to singing in the Gospels – most notably on Maundy Thursday before Jesus and the disciples went to the Mount of Olives – but we rarely reflect on the significance of Jesus singing. In the way that the Levites in today’s first lesson helped the people understand the meaning of the scriptures, Jesus did the same. And what a prophecy he chose to begin his public ministry!

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.

Jesus, our great High Priest – the eternal Word of God – the image of the unseen God – filled with Grace and Truth – the one through everything that was made – the revelation of God’s glory helps the people in the Nazareth synagogue understand **in his very person and through his singing voice**. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus re-membered his own people back into being a Beloved Community.

This ‘Year of the Lord’s favor’ is what the Hebrew Scriptures call the Year of Jubilee. We read about it in the Book of Leviticus: Every fifty years all landed was meant to revert to its original owner (Lev. 25: 13– 34; 27:16– 24), **and** all who were slaves were to be set free (25:39– 54), **and** all debts were to be cancelled. This was intended to remind the people of Israel that common ownership of the land reflected the covenant relationship that they had with God himself; “*The land is mine; with me you are*

but aliens and tenants (Lev 25:23b). Now, there is no evidence whatsoever in the Hebrew Scriptures that the Year of Jubilee ever happened (surprise surprise...can you imagine trying to get that law through Congress!) So, for Jesus to say that this prophecy about Jubilee was being fulfilled *today* is also hugely significant. Jesus, if you will, **embodies** the Year of Jubilee in himself; not just in his ministry, but in his very being since he is true God and true Man. The Year of Jubilee was never kept until then, when God came into his land and among his own people and ushered in new hope.

My friends, we need to learn the melody of Jubilee – remembering that the planet belongs to God, and that we have been entrusted with its care; remembering that we are made in God's image and we have been entrusted with the care of one another. The melody of Jubilee calls us to respect our planet and the dignity of every human being. We must learn the melody of Jubilee.

Now, of course, I cannot let today go by without mentioning the Presidential inauguration. Whatever you think of the way that the Bishop of Washington's ended her sermon last Monday by addressing the President personally, one thing is clear – that all of us, regardless of our political beliefs, are called to seek unity in diversity – the main subject of her sermon – and that that, as Christians, we are called to a life characterized by love-filled service. As Bishop Budde said in her sermon, *"Unity at times, is sacrificial, in the way that love is sacrificial, a giving of ourselves for the sake of another. Jesus of Nazareth, in his Sermon on the Mount, exhorts us to love not only our neighbors, but to love our enemies, and to pray for those who persecute us; to be merciful, as our God is merciful, and to forgive others, as God forgives us. Jesus went out of his way to welcome those whom his society deemed as outcasts."*

Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

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 he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Are our eyes fixed on Jesus? Are we ready to learn his melody of Jubilee?

References

- 1 Extract from a lecture by Marty Haugen 'Keeping the People's Song Alive' delivered to a conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 1998.
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