

“The Bible and Our Lives and World”
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6 and 8-10 and Luke 4:14-21
First Presbyterian Church
January 24, 2016
Rev. Glen Bell

Two or three generations ago, we used to collect stamps or coins or political campaign buttons. Now we postmodern Americans collect experiences. Destination weddings are *de rigueur*. Destination lodging and dining are now also quite common.

A couple of years ago, *Esquire* magazine published a little article on this trend. The author reminds us that the Michelin Guide, published since the 1920s, gives two stars to a restaurant “worth a detour” and three stars to one “worth a journey.” When I read the following description of Winvian in Litchfield, Connecticut, I found myself coveting such a journey:

“Set on 113 acres of the most bucolic of Connecticut landscapes, Winvian resort is a reverie of the wholly untypical New England inn, with eighteen uniquely designed, themed cottages, including the Golf Cottage, complete with interior putting greens, and the amazing Helicopter Cottage, which encloses a fully restored 1968 Sikorsky Sea King helicopter. The owner has seen to every detail, giving the chef carte blanche to create wonderful menus with what he feels is the best of the season, much of it plucked that day from his garden.”

Today, the living God invites us to something similar: destination worship.

I fear, you see, that our worship together has become something of a routine and – dare I say it? – a bore. We may sit in the same seats, talk with the same one or two people each week, look and listen just as passively as if we were in front of the TV at home, watching the NFL playoffs or *Narcos* or *House of Cards*, with our cat in our lap and a drink in our hand.

Sometimes our hopes are limited. Sometimes our expectations even more so.

The simplicity of today’s lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures belies its importance. “All the people gathered together,” we hear. The scribe Ezra brought the book of the law of Moses. “He read from it . . . and the ears of all the people were attentive.”

So far, it sounds a lot like what we do each Sunday. The Scriptures are read and interpreted, and the people listen. What’s the big deal?

The historical setting gives us an important clue. The people of Israel had been devastated in defeat by the Babylonians. As John Bright writes, “[In] the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile . . . her national existence was ended and with it, all the institutions of her corporate life. . . . The Jews [deported] to Babylon represented the cream the country’s political, ecclesiastical and intellectual leadership.” The exile represented an overwhelming crisis in the life of God’s people.

Now, many years later, Ezra and Nehemiah found their life's mission in this context, in the return of the exiles to Jerusalem – Ezra as priest and spiritual guide; Nehemiah as ruler and builder. Nehemiah led the exiles in reconstructing the city walls, and Ezra's priestly work was to reorganize the Jewish community with the Scriptures at their heart.

Today's lesson is not just one reading of the Hebrew Scriptures in a long series of occasions. But it is the occasion – the occasion - when the people first gathered to hear and remember the words that created their community and gave them life.

Rick Nutt taught for many years at Muskingum College in Ohio. He points to the Jewish celebration of Simchat Torah, during Sukkot, as a way to begin to understand this Scripture.

“The Jewish people,” he writes, “mark the last day of Sukkot, the Feast of Booths, with the celebration of Simchat Torah – Rejoicing in the Torah. That day ends the annual cycle of the reading of the Torah in the synagogue, and the people read the opening of the book of Genesis to begin the process again.”

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy – reading through the five books of the Law, the Torah, week by week – and then back to the beginning of Genesis.

I was talking about this with my friend Jennifer Singer, the rabbinical student who is the spiritual leader of Congregation Kol HaNeshama, here in Sarasota. She shared that one of the customs is to literally dance with the Torah scrolls in our arms. We read the last passage of Deuteronomy, she said, and then the first passage of Genesis immediately after.

The last letter of Deuteronomy, she shared, is a lamed (L). The first letter of Genesis is a bet (B). “Lamed-bet” spells “heart” in Hebrew. So as we turn from the end to the beginning, she said, we are reminded of God's heart, of God's great love for us.

This is destination worship. The people of Israel have returned from exile. They have worked hard to fortify the walls of Jerusalem. They gather together in the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday. And the ears of all the people are eager and attentive to the Scriptures.

Nehemiah and Ezra said, “This day is holy to the Lord your God.” And all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.

What a sense of hope and anticipation! What conviction of the Spirit moving through the message! What expectation among the people!

What would it be like for us if we were to lift the Scriptures and to dance and sing?

The Word of the Lord, the Word of the Lord, (sung with Bible raised)
The Word of the Lord gives life!
The Word of the Lord, the Word of the Lord,
The Word of the Lord gives life!

This is our confidence, that “the word of God is living and active” (Hebrews 4:12). Jesus says, “Let the thirsty come to me, and let those who believe drink, for ‘our of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” (John 7:37-38)

God speaks. God gives drink to the thirsty.

The scene of our New Testament lesson is similar. The people of God are gathered in worship, gathered around the Scriptures, waiting with eagerness and anticipation for the Holy One to speak.

Jesus, the hometown boy, has returned to Nazareth. A hush falls over the synagogue and the eyes of all the worshipers are fixed on him, and he reads these words,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
to share good news with the poor,
release for the captives,
enlightenment for the blind,
freedom for the oppressed, and
love for all the people.”

This passage is both the announcement of the core principles of the Jesus’ ministry and the touch stone, the home base to which we Christians return again and again.

First, core principles. As the ministry of Jesus begins, John the Baptist proclaims that through him everyone shall see the salvation of God (Luke 3:6). In Luke’s Gospel, just after the nativity story, and the growth of the boy Jesus, and the announcement of John the Baptist, and the wilderness temptations, Jesus begins his ministry.

This, this passage, is the summary, the motto, the core identity, the elevator speech of all that Jesus will be about over the next three years. Taken straight from the Scriptures, announced during worship, Jesus Christ tells us who he is and what he is about.

If we would learn more about Jesus, if we would be transformed by the living God, we will be met by the Lord at worship, here at pulpit, font and table.

Second, the proclamation of God’s Word in worship is our foundation, our touch stone. Just a month before spring training for the Orioles and Pirates here, I will say this: For us it is home plate.

This is the reason we come back to worship, week after week after week after week. We may have heard the story many times before – but we need to listen over and over again. The stories form us. They shape us. They guide us. They make us who we are.

Carol Lakey Hess puts it this way. “Whatever we take to be the heart of the Gospel will be the central shaping force in our life of faith. In today’s passage we learn what Jesus came to do. As we measure our lives against this, we are following Jesus’ ministry.” This Scripture becomes a

plumb line for us. “If we are going to study, interpret and follow the Gospel, we should keep coming back to this text to measure our work.”

I think that may be part of the reason last year, when Anne and I were in England, that we visited so many cathedrals and churches. We walked through one churchyard after another in London, and then took the train to Salisbury, Winchester, Canterbury, Cambridge and Ely. I climbed all the way to the top of Great St. Mary’s in Cambridge. We were swallowed up late one afternoon by beauty of evensong in Ely.

We visited those sites not as some exercise of historical curiosity, but to see the place where the faithful gathered, century after century, to be formed and reformed and transformed, to hear the voice of the Lord still echoing the message of release and enlightenment and freedom and love.

Can you hear it here and now? Can you hear the whispers and echoes of those who have come before us in this place, over the last eleven decades, here at First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota?

It may be easy for you to fall into the trap of seeing worship as a routine, a pattern, a rhythm without much life or vitality. But that is not so easy to do when you recognize your friend only a few seats away, leaning forward to listen, eager to hear what God is saying today.

So for the next minute or two, I invite you to do something unusual: Speak with and introduce yourselves to those sitting around you, especially those you do not know. Tell them who you are. Tell them why you come to worship.

Tell them who you are. Tell them why you come to worship.

(pause for four to five minutes)

Sisters and brothers, you and I may never make it to Litchfield, Connecticut for that experience in destination lodging and dining. We may spend hours in *National Geographic* or *Travel + Leisure* or some other magazine or website, dreaming of all the places we might travel.

But each Lord’s Day, we can be met here by the living God, who continues to speak and forgive and love and transform. For

*The Word of the Lord, the Word of the Lord,
The Word of the Lord gives life!*