

In your hometown

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Nehemiah 8:1-10

Luke 4: 14-30

Reading the Bible can be a treacherous thing. I have heard people in this very congregation say they are afraid to read the Bible for fear of what they might find there. And other people have admitted to me that they are not eager to read the Bible because of how it has been used as a weapon against them. And I hate to mention the boredom factor. This is an unfortunate legacy some of us have inherited and that we pass onto the next generations, whether we want to or not.

My own history with the Bible is not so traumatic. I grew up hearing the Bible at church and bedtime Bible stories. I have clear memories of seeing my father read the Bible every morning. When we visited my grandparents, we read scripture with them before meals. I was allowed to read the book of Job as part of the curriculum in my public high school. In English class, we were instructed about the references to biblical texts in literature. The Bible was not only devotional, but literature.

This kind of weaving the Bible through daily life is not as common these days, at least in my circles of acquaintances. Family Bible time? Reading the Bible in public school? I don't think so, not that dangerous book. Without the Bible as part of our everyday experience, we are not as biblically literate as previous generations. And what we don't know we sometimes fear.

Our scripture texts this morning illustrate two responses to the reading of the Bible. The first is from Nehemiah, a book we don't crack open much. Ezra and Nehemiah, generally treated together, give us the stories of the children of Israel

returning from the Babylonian exile. The people are eager to hear and embrace the law that was taken from their great grandparents 70 years earlier. Their response is immediate and poignant as they begin to reclaim their identity after several generations.

Nehemiah 8

¹All 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.

²Accordingly, 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. ³He 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. ⁴The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; ⁶Then 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. ⁸So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰Then 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.'

Who would think that people could get so emotional when hearing scripture? The scene portrayed sounds like a revival service; the people are shouting “amen,” bowing to the ground, crying in joy and weeping, perhaps in shame. Kim didn’t read all the verses in the passage. I had her skip the verses with the list of the names of the 13 men who stood on either side of Ezra as he read. And there are 13 others names listed as Levites and teachers who moved among the crowd helping the people understand the scripture throughout the reading. These omitted verses also mention that the people “stay in place” for the whole reading. Ezra and the other priests must have really been teaching for it clearly says that “they gave interpretation, they gave sense.”

It is not exactly clear what “law” they were hearing. It might have been portions of the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Or perhaps only Deuteronomy. Or it could have been some other scripture all together. The Torah was not yet assembled in the form we know today. Whatever it was, it was a long reading since Ezra read from the scroll of the Law from early morning until midday, by most estimates six hours.

This was not some obligatory reading of their grandparents’ holy book. The people requested that the Law of Moses be read to the gathering. Perhaps this represents more to the people than the Law. Hearing and understanding the law connects them to their lost heritage. It is a symbolic reclaiming of the identity that was taken from them while they were in exile in Babylon.

Now upon returning to their land, they are able to worship as their ancestors did. Part of their new independence is the freedom to worship as they please. Though they are tempted to grieve for all that was lost, though they are tempted to weep for the ways

they have broken the law and forgotten the meaning, Nehemiah tells them that the “joy of the Lord” is their strength. The people had to be reassured several times by Nehemiah that keeping the law was a joyful thing. They are told to go celebrate: “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our God; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Those of us who have issues with authority may find this experience with the law mind boggling. But in Ezra-Nehemiah the law represents freedom. I have sometimes heard people marvel at the orderliness of the traffic in the United States compared to traffic in, say, India. Even in Washington, where we complain about traffic, drivers stop at stop signs and traffic lights, we stop for pedestrians and make way for bikers. It is respect for the traffic laws that brings freedom and safety to those on the roads. Perhaps it is this kind of freedom we are seeing in Nehemiah, a return to rule and order that gives life and prevents early death. Returning to the law after generations in exile, they now have the liberty to learn again what it means to be Jewish.

It is not only the law that Ezra and Nehemiah are restoring. Cyrus, the Persian ruler, is permitting them, in fact ordering them, to rebuild the temple. They are also building a wall around Jerusalem. No longer will the people be in danger, they will be a holy people unto God. And separate. One of the scarier, and from our vantage point cruel, parts of Ezra-Nehemiah is the way that the people are instructed to reclaim their Jewish heritage. They are to separate themselves, not only from the others in the land, but from their own families.

You can imagine that 70 years in exile would have meant some acculturation to the Babylonian ways and people. Men married women and had children. When they returned to the land of Israel, and in the ways of Israel, the men were instructed to divorce their wives and send them and their children who didn't speak Hebrew back to where they came from. Perhaps this is another reason people are crying as they hear the law. They realize the real life implications as they reclaim the law as their own.

The second reading from the lectionary today is from Luke. It is another story of people listening to the scripture being read. It is the Sabbath so Jesus goes to the synagogue and reads from the scroll of the prophet, Isaiah. Jesus has been visiting synagogues throughout the region. His teaching is highly regarded and praised by everyone until he comes home to Nazareth.

Luke 4

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*¹⁸The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Most High has anointed me
to bring good news to those who are poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to those who are held captive,*

recovery of sight to those who are blind,

and release to those in prison,

¹⁹to proclaim the year of our God's favour.'

²⁰And 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. ²¹Then he began to say to them, 'Today this

scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'

²³He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!"

And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum." ' ²⁴And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the

prophet's home town. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a

severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet

Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.' ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town,

and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Does this sound familiar? Have you ever been in a church service where the scripture was read and you thought, perhaps self righteously, "Wow, are these people listening? This text is really an indictment on this crowd." But the congregation just sits quietly and listens, people nod absent-mindedly, saying "the word of the Lord, thanks be

to God.” And you sit there outraged that the powerful prophetic text has gone right over their heads.

Can you imagine if you stood up and said, “Who are you to agree so quickly with this? Are you living right? Do you trust God for your daily bread, for healing? How can you sit here and affirm this when your life doesn’t reflect the scripture at all?” Can you imagine how you might be escorted from the service and kicked out of the building and asked to return only after you have had a good deal of therapy?

But I wonder if something else is going on here. Clearly, the people may be disturbed by Jesus claiming to fulfill the scripture, right there among them. But they seem to be with him, nodding in agreement and wowed by his teaching just like in the other synagogues. Then someone asks, “and who’s your daddy?” And he jumps on them.

We seldom think of Jesus getting angry. Sure he turned over the tables in the temple but can you name any other times when he loses his temper? As I read this text this week I saw it in a new light.

Remember, this is Luke’s version, the gospel where Jesus is born in scandal, to an unwed mother. Surely the people of Nazareth would have known about the humiliation of Jesus’ birth, not just that his mother wasn’t married but he was born in a barn. This reminder of his family tree seems like a sensitive topic for Jesus.

So we might hear this as, “Now which one is he? Oh, that’s Joseph’s son.” I wonder if Jesus heard, “Joseph’s son? Don’t try to impress us with your knowledge, we know your true origins.” Jesus seems more than a little sensitive to the question, to the insinuation about his parentage.

So he goes all the way, he really lets them have it. Unlike the versions in Mark and Matthew, Jesus quotes scripture at them. “It is like the proverb, this is just like Elijah, this is just what Elisha had to put up with. You will not see God’s power in your midst. You are too blind and judgmental.”

An overreaction perhaps? These are the people that have known him his whole life that helped raise him, took care of him when his mother had to get water. And this is what he thinks of them? They don’t stand for this kind of disrespect. They drag Jesus out of the synagogue with intentions to throw him off the cliff, just like Jesus did with that herd of possessed swine later in Luke. But somehow he gets away, moving through the crowd and going on his way.

No wonder we are afraid of the Bible. These two texts today show that there is some danger. You return to your homeland, to your hometown, after generations in exile and you are so looking forward to hearing the comfort of scripture. You ask that it be read at the city center. And while most of it is a comfort, you hear that you have to divorce your wife and send your children away.

Or you return to your hometown, to worship with your old neighbors and friends, do a little Bible study. And suddenly your worthiness is questioned and you are run out of town.

Though thousands of years separate us from these texts, the situations are not unlike what we sometimes experience today. Just as the listeners in Jerusalem needed people walking among them to help make sense of the text, we often need the text interpreted for us, even though it is in a language we understand. And when scripture is quoted in anger or judgment, we have a strong reaction.

How then do we hear the Bible in our own hometowns? How do we help interpret it for each other? It is nothing to be ashamed of — to need help in understanding the text. In fact, for most of Judaism and Christianity the people in the pews were not allowed to read the Bible, to handle it themselves. It was the property of the priests, scribes and Levites, it was the property of the priests and monks. It was properly understood by only a few. This idea of reading the Bible, book in hand, is a relatively new development.

But we come from a tradition where the early Anabaptists disputed this and said that the Bible is a book for all disciples. The Bible is not to be read and interpreted only by the “holy, learned people.” It is to be read together, in community. It is to be read collectively so that we help each other understand the meaning, the multiple meanings.

Reading the Bible this way, together, doesn’t make it any less dangerous. We might still have a tendency to center the scripture in our own context, to gloss over the prophetic texts that point to us. We still might pick and choose our favorite passages and leave out the parts that make us uncomfortable. We still might self-righteously try to use the Bible as a weapon against those with whom we disagree. We might take it seriously and make huge life changes that our families and friends don’t understand.

The hazards are there, but this text from Nehemiah invites us to remember that the reading of scripture can be joyful, when we do it together. And it can be accompanied or at least followed, by the eating of rich food and drink. (Maybe this is the biblical imperative for fellowship meals.)

Let us read, together, without fear. Let us read with awareness, let us listen carefully, interpreting with information, deliberation, and compassion. And let us do so with joy knowing that there is a great celebration awaiting us, in this world and the next.