

A Sermon Preached

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January 24, 2010 – the Third Sunday after the Epiphany

The Church of the Holy Spirit, Lake Forest, Illinois

It was a pulpit, made from wood like this one is, though probably less polished and intricate. It might have been little more than a raised platform, so that as the people gathered they could hear and see the speaker more easily from within the crowd.

Instead of being constructed inside the temple, where only the few who could go through the rituals of purity were allowed to enter, this pulpit was built right in the town square, just in front of the Water Gate. And everybody was there – an older translation of this passage reads: “all the people gathered as one man into the square”¹. Think of it: 42,360 people, Nehemiah tells us in an earlier chapter, and they all come together “as one man”. One person. One body. It echoes forward to the language of Jesus and Paul, doesn’t it?

I need to pause here, and explain what has happened in the chapters leading up to today’s first lesson, a reading from Nehemiah found in the Old Testament. Nehemiah, a faithful Israelite who serves as the cup-bearer to the king of Babylon, learns from his brother that Jerusalem’s walls have been broken and burned. This city, where his own ancestors are buried, has become a shameful ruin.

¹ Neh. 8:1, Revised Standard Version

Understandably, Nehemiah is devastated. And so this is what he does: he prays. He fasts. And he asks God for guidance.

Soon afterwards, Nehemiah leaves Babylon, with the King's blessing. He takes with him some papers to grant him safe passage, and some men to assist him, and he returns to Jerusalem. In 52 short days, despite some serious efforts on the part of neighboring rulers to stop their progress, the men rebuild Jerusalem's wall.

When the wall is complete and the city safe, Nehemiah registers the people by name and family. I assure you, there are many long and difficult-to-pronounce names to be read in chapter 7: Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Azariah, Raami'ah, Naha'mani, Bilshan, Mispere'th, Bigvai, Ba'anah...the list does go on. I think it's the author's way of telling us, so many generations later: "This is who was here, and this is whose child he or she was, and this is what we did." They came home, out of their exile, out of their captivity. They came home to the city where their parents and grandparents lay buried. They repaired the wall and fortified the city. They gave from what they had to form a treasury, a common wealth to be shared. And somebody built that wooden pulpit.

So they gather, all these people, as one body. And Ezra, the priest and scribe, stands on that wooden platform in the midst of women and children and men, and he reads aloud from the holy texts of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. He reads from those first five books of the Bible, from what he would have called Torah, or the law that was given to Moses. He begins reading early in

the morning, and he keeps reading until the middle of the day. The people press in and around him. They listen, and they understand.

Ezra blesses the Lord, and then comes that beautiful line that lives on in so many African-American churches: “and all the people said, ‘Amen’”². And then Ezra the priest, and Nehemiah, now the governor, together declare that day to be holy. No one is to mourn. They call the people to celebrate – to feast on rich food and drink sweet wine, and to share with anyone who doesn’t have enough. “Do not be grieved,” they say, “for the joy of the Lord is your strength”³.

The joy of the Lord is our strength. We sang words to that effect in Hymn 631 just a few minutes ago. I invite you now to take your hymnals back out and open to that hymn – number 631 (don’t worry – I won’t make you sing!). It’s the hymn the congregation sang just as the Gospel was brought out to be read in the midst of the people. “Book of books, our people’s strength,” we sang. “Bringing freedom, spreading truth, shedding light that none can measure”.

I think about Ezra and Nehemiah as I look again at the words of the second verse: “poets, prophets, scholars, saints, each a word from God repeating”. I think of those two faithful men, and of all the people – all 42,360 of them – gathered as one singular body, in and around that pulpit in the town square, to hear the word of God repeated. I think of the poets, the prophets, the scholars and the saints who came

² Neh. 8:6, RSV

³ Neh. 8:10, RSV

before and after, each carrying a word that would become a part of our common wealth – a piece of who we understand ourselves to be.

I think of the word of God repeated among all the people who gathered at the Cathedral last weekend. The word “miqra” is Hebrew for the public reading of scripture, and it’s taken from today’s lesson from Nehemiah. People of all ages, from all around the Diocese of Chicago, including Rebecca Roberts, two brave and good-humored CHS confirmation mentors, and a number of our own confirmation students, came together throughout the weekend to read and hear every word of the Bible read aloud. They carried the word forward; they proclaimed it from within the assembly.

I think of the word from God repeated by young Peter Lincoln, from this wooden pulpit, in the midst of many, many people gathered here on Wednesday to lay his grandfather to rest. Peter reminded us from the words of Lamentations that God’s mercy is steadfast, that God’s faithfulness never, ever, ever comes to an end.

And I think of the word from God repeated by Jesus. In today’s Gospel lesson Jesus stands before the people assembled in the synagogue for their Sabbath. He’s at home, in Nazareth. He steps into their midst and carries forward the word of the prophet Isaiah. And the word he repeats is one of release for captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed. And then he returns the scroll and assures the people – not that they *would* see – but that they *had* seen the scripture...fulfilled.

In the final verse of Hymn 631, we praise God: God the Father, God the Spirit, and God, the Word made flesh, in Jesus.

We carry *that* Word forward, when we, too, realize that there are walls to be restored in Haiti, and Honduras, and beyond. That there are people to be fed. And that many, many of those people who wait now within broken and burning walls, those for whom no feast is prepared, they *know* that the joy of the Lord is their strength. By many accounts, they have nothing. But they have that.

I thought of God's word repeated when I heard a story on the news the other day, about the fact that the camps people have cobbled together in Haiti are not quiet at night. Because at night, the people sing. They may not have homes, or family, or food, or water. And they sing.

How can we *help* but carry God's word forward, still, in this moment? How can we *help* but rebuild the walls, and provide a feast for people who have nothing prepared? And how will we see – how have we *already* seen – the scripture fulfilled? We gather as one body...in the language of Jesus, in the language of Paul, in the language of Nehemiah. We gather as one body to carry God's word, to *become* God's word, in the middle of a broken and burning and starving and **astorishingly** beautiful world. We carry and are carried by one another. We carry and are carried by God. We are *one body*. And the joy of the Lord is our strength.

(And all the people say...) Amen.