

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP:

*The decrees of the LORD are firm,
and all of them are righteous.
They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the honeycomb.*
Let us worship God.

(Psalm 19.9b-10)

HYMN: Come, let us sing to the Lord our song!

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Living and life-giving God:

Once again, we gather to celebrate your presence in the world and your ongoing interest in us human beings. Specifically, we come to listen to you and to speak to you. We long for your word of affirmation and assurance. Help us also, though, to be willing to hear a word from you that guides, challenges, or corrects us.

We confess that we often hear words of scripture without expecting to hear a word from you. Too often we let the words of scripture wash over us, rather than influence us. Too often, we listen half-heartedly, rather than expecting to hear something important.

Forgive us, we pray. Help us to pay greater attention to the words of scripture, and to listen for what the Holy Spirit may be saying to us through them. May we then be further influenced and shaped by what we hear.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior; and we pray together, now, as he taught us:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*There is one God,
and one Mediator between God and humanity:
Jesus Christ, himself human,
who gave himself as a ransom for all human beings.*

(1 Timothy 2.5-6a)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,
let us be assured that God will forgive us.

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **Old Testament Reading:** Nehemiah 8.1-3, 5-12 - Ezra reads from the Law
The story in this reading is from the time following the Babylonian Exile, when the people of Israel had returned to their homeland.
In today's reading, the people receive instruction in the Law of Moses, which they have apparently forgotten.

- **Psalms:** Psalm 19 - "The heavens declare the glory of God"
Psalm 19 is a psalm of praise, in which the writer praises God, first as Creator of the universe, and then as Giver of the Law.
In the first few verses, the writer speaks of how God's glory is manifested in the sky (particularly in the power of the sun), and in the rest of the psalm, he celebrates God's gift of the Law to his people.
Notice how he has chosen a *variety* of words to refer to the Law, in order to avoid sounding too repetitive — words such as "statutes", "precepts", "commands", and "decrees".
The psalm ties in with today's Old Testament reading, in which the Israelites receive instruction in the Law.

- **Letter Reading:** 1 Corinthians 12.12-31a - Gifts of the Spirit (Part 2)
In this reading, Paul continues his discussion on "gifts of the Spirit", which he began in last week's reading. Again, his point is that there are a great variety of spiritual gifts, and that Christians don't all receive the same ones.
To illustrate his point, he uses as an analogy the various parts of the human body — which all have different functions, yet all work together.

- **Gospel Reading:** Luke 4.14-21 - Jesus' inaugural sermon (Part 1)
This is Luke's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry.
Jesus travels from place to place in Galilee, teaching in synagogues — including the one in Nazareth, his home town.

HYMN: Ancient Words

SERMON

Two weeks ago, we read Luke's account of the baptism of Jesus — the event that marked a major turning point in his life. It was the point at which he ceased being the town carpenter, and took steps toward beginning the ministry of a traveling rabbi. After a one-week detour into the Gospel of John last Sunday, we return to Luke today, to read *his* account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

Luke's account is different from those in the other three Gospels in that he depicts Jesus as car-

rying on a ministry all by himself for awhile. In Matthew, Mark, and John, Jesus begins to gather a group of disciples around him almost right away; while here in Luke, there is no mention of disciples at all, yet; not until we get to the next chapter — Chapter 5.

Incidentally, in reading the passage for today, we've skipped a significant story: the account of Jesus' forty days of being tempted in the wilderness. We'll come back to that story in a few weeks, on the First Sunday in Lent.

Fresh from his forty days in the wilderness, then, Jesus undertakes a preaching tour in the towns of Galilee, going from place to place, speaking in synagogues, where faithful Jews gathered for worship every Saturday. Luke, with his characteristic emphasis on the Holy Spirit, says that Jesus returned to Galilee from the wilderness *in the power of the Spirit* (Luke 4.14).

It's interesting that Jesus begins his ministry speaking in synagogues, because we often think of him doing his teaching in outdoor settings, such as his so-called Sermon on the Mount, and his teaching from a boat on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. However, up to this point, Luke hasn't told us anything that Jesus has actually said. All he says is, *everyone praised him* (Luke 4.15), indicating that his teaching was well received by his listeners.

And so, in his travels, Jesus eventually comes to Nazareth, his home town. Matthew and Mark also tell a story of Jesus speaking in the synagogue in his home town, but in both cases, their story comes later in Jesus' ministry, not at the beginning. Although Matthew and Mark don't report what Jesus actually said on that occasion, they do report that the hometown crowd was not impressed, leaving Jesus to remark, *A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives, and in his own home* (Mark 6.4).

Here in Luke, though, we're given a more detailed picture of the event. And at this point, I should point out that we're reading only the first *half* of the story today. For some reason, the people who created the Common Lectionary decided to spread this story over *two* Sundays — so we're reading the first half today, and the rest next Sunday.

It's noteworthy that Luke observes that it was Jesus' "custom" to attend services in the synagogue on the Sabbath day (Luke 4.16). This emphasizes the fact that Jesus spoke to his fellow Jews *as a Jew*, not as an outsider to the Jewish faith.

Synagogue services, like our own services today, included one or more readings from the scriptures, and some kind of comment, meditation, or sermon on the passage that was read. And so in today's reading, Jesus reads from scripture, and then comments on what he has read. He is handed a scroll containing the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Unrolling it, he finds a short, two-verse passage in Chapter 61, and reads it to the congregation. According to Luke, the words are:

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners*

*and recovery of sight for the blind;
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.* (Luke 4.18-19; compare Isaiah 61.1-2)

Incidentally, the words reported by Luke aren't exactly the same as what we find in Isaiah itself. For one thing, Luke was probably working from the Greek translation of the Old Testament rather than the original Hebrew; and for another, he may have been quoting the words from memory, rather than having the text right in front of him.

Isaiah's words were addressed originally to the people of Israel who had recently returned from their exile in Babylonia in the 500s BC. They were confronted with the massive and monumental job of rebuilding their cities and towns, as well as their entire society and their religious institutions — including the temple in Jerusalem, which the Babylonians had torn down. These words come from the same part of Isaiah as two other passages that we've read in the past three weeks — passages that contain messages of hope and encouragement for the Israelites in this discouraging situation.

And so, Jesus rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant, and sits down — that is, he sits down to *speak*, since, unlike Presbyterian ministers today, Jewish rabbis in the First Century *sat* to deliver their sermons. And then he preaches his sermon — a remarkably short sermon, in fact; just eight words long in English: *Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing* (Luke 4.21). At least, that's all we hear *today*; there will be *more* when we read the rest of the story next Sunday.

In saying what he does, then, Jesus re-interprets Isaiah's words, using them to give the congregation a sense of what he and his ministry are all about. Interpreters refer to Jesus' comment on this text from Isaiah as an “inaugural sermon” or a “programmatic preview of his ministry”. I guess we Canadians could say it was analogous to a Speech from the Throne, in which the government puts forward its agenda for the upcoming session of the Parliament or Legislature.

In his sermon, then, Jesus characterizes his message as “proclaiming good news to the poor”. By “proclaiming freedom for the prisoners”, “proclaiming recovery of sight for the blind”, and “setting the oppressed free”, Jesus means that the purpose of his ministry will be to liberate people from oppressive situations of various kinds. As we know, his miraculous healings, of course, including enabling blind people to see, certainly did that; they liberated people from disabilities that had condemned them to a life of poverty, and gave them the opportunity to earn an income. I don't know of any situations in which Jesus literally freed someone from prison during his ministry, but he did liberate people from metaphorical prisons of disability, demon possession, and, in the case of Zacchaeus the tax collector, their own greed.

Interpreters generally consider the words *the year of the Lord's favor* (Luke 4.19) as referring to the “Year of Jubilee”, which, in the book of Leviticus, the Israelites were commanded to observe every fifty years. In that year, they were to cancel all outstanding debts, set all slaves free, and return all land to the original owners — or their descendants. It was a measure that was

intended to prevent the rich from getting richer and the poor poorer, although it's uncertain whether it was ever actually practised in ancient Israel. In speaking to the congregation in Nazareth, then, Jesus portrayed his ministry as a kind of Jubilee, in which things would be reset and restored.

Jesus proclaimed this message in the synagogue in Nazareth that day using the words of scripture — words that had been written centuries before, to other people, in a different situation. The passage from Isaiah 61 thus took on new meaning, as God spoke a new message through it to that First-Century congregation in Nazareth.

Today's Old Testament reading is an interesting parallel to the Gospel reading, for in it, too, someone reads aloud words from the scriptures to an audience. In this case, the reader is Ezra, a priest and a teacher of the law. The time is the mid-400s BC, nearly a hundred years after the people of Israel had returned to their homeland from their exile in Babylonia. In those hundred years, the people of Israel have rebuilt their towns and cities, and rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem; but the wall around Jerusalem has only recently been rebuilt, under the leadership of Nehemiah, the governor.

Today's reading comes from a part of the book in which the people renew their commitment to God's covenant with them after the rebuilding of the city wall has been finished. The proceedings begin with Ezra reading to the people from what the narrator calls *the Book of the Law of Moses* (Nehemiah 8.1). It's not clear, though, which book is meant, whether it's a single book, such as the Book of Deuteronomy, or the first *five* books of the Old Testament, which together eventually came to be referred to as "the Law".

According to today's reading, Ezra read aloud from this book *from daybreak until noon* (Nehemiah 8.3) — in other words, for a period of about six hours. My guess is that he didn't just read rules and regulations, though, but also part of Israel's story — most notably, perhaps, the story of Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt, their encounter with God at Mount Sinai, where God had made a formal covenant with them, and their trek to the Promised Land.

Significantly, a number of Levites participate in this public reading of scripture by explaining to the people the meaning of the words that Ezra is reading. The people's response to the reading and interpretation of scripture, then, is to weep — presumably because they realize that they haven't been living up to God's expectations. Later on in the book, they formally renew their commitment to the covenant and the law; but for now, Ezra and the governor, Nehemiah, urge the people to be joyful and to celebrate, because they now know and understand the law of God. Words that were written centuries before become meaningful again, as God speaks to the people through them. The people gain a new understanding of their identity as the people of God, and they learn how God wants them, as his people, to live.

It's interesting that both passages tell a story in which a biblical character reads from the Bible. Ezra, one of the main characters in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, reads from the Book of the Law of Moses. Likewise, Jesus, the main character in the Gospels, reads from the Book

of Isaiah. More important, though, is the fact that, through the reading of scripture, God speaks his message to human beings. In the Old Testament reading, the message is a reminder of Israel's covenant relationship with God and of the terms of that covenant. It leads the people to renew their commitment to that covenant. In the Gospel reading, the message is an announcement of what Jesus' ministry is all about, and of what he is setting out to do.

The practice of reading from the scriptures and reflecting on what has been read is a very familiar practice to *us*, of course, because that's what we do in our worship services every Sunday. Through this practice, we believe that God speaks to us in our own situation — not just through the reading of scripture itself, but also through the reflection on, and the interpretation of, what has been read. We believe that through the “ancient words” of scripture, we can hear a message from God that speaks to us in our own situation — a message that guides us, challenges us, encourages us, or comforts us.

A lot has changed in the world since ancient times, but we human beings ourselves haven't changed much. Our hopes, fears, desires, motivations, virtues, and vices are no different from those of our ancient ancestors. And so the scriptures remain an effective medium through which God communicates with us today. Through them, God reveals himself to us; through them he gives us insights into ourselves, and through them, he shows us what he desires us to be like, and what he intends the world to be like.

And so, we continue to read from the scriptures and reflect on them, both on our own, and together as a congregation, hoping and expecting to hear a message from God through them.

HYMN: Break now the bread of life

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

Gracious and faithful God:

We give you thanks that you communicate with us human beings — that you make yourself and your ways known to us, and that you call us into relationship with yourself and with each other. We thank you for the long history of your interaction with human beings, some of which is recorded in the Bible; and we thank you that through the Bible, you continue to speak to us today.

Help us, then, to listen for what you say to us, and enable us to hear what you say. Help us to see your word not as an intrusion into our lives, but as something we need — something that both guides and sustains us. Help us to be receptive to what you say, not only when you speak to comfort and encourage us, but also when you speak to confront and correct us. Help us to allow ourselves to be influenced and shaped by your word, so that we may become more and more the kind of people you want us to be.

We pray for the church — your worldwide family. In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we pray for greater unity within your church. May we Christians everywhere acknowledge

our essential unity in spite of differences in doctrine, tradition, or taste. Save us from petty attitudes of rivalry and competition, and enable us to work together cooperatively to carry on the ministry of Jesus in the world today. We pray also for your blessing on the Near East School of Theology, in Lebanon, which we help to support through our givings to *Presbyterians Sharing*. Prosper its work, we pray, as it provides a theological education to people who will be serving as ministers in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine.

We pray for members of our congregation, and others close to us, who are experiencing difficulties and setbacks of various kinds, in particular those whom we name before you now:

_____. Grant each one strength, guidance, or encouragement, we pray, as they deal with their challenges; and grant healing to those who are ill or have been injured.

As we pray for the wider world today, we are conscious of the suffering of the people of Tonga, dealing with the aftermath of a violent undersea volcano and the ensuing tsunami. Although we don't yet understand the full extent of the damage that has been caused, we realize that it is considerable; and we ask for your blessing on those affected as they do their best to cope with this disaster. May aid from the international community arrive quickly, and may it help to meet people's immediate needs, as well as assisting with the longer-term work of cleaning up and rebuilding.

We pray for the family members and friends of the family who died trying to walk across the border into the United States this past week, that you would comfort and strengthen them in their time of loss. We pray also that this incident may demonstrate to people how dangerous such an attempt in the dead of winter is, and that it may discourage others from trying to do the same. We pray as well that those who organized this attempt to cross the border illegally may be found, and may face suitable consequences for their crime.

We pray for the situation in eastern Europe in which Ukraine is being threatened with a possible invasion by Russia. We thank you for efforts that have been going on to prevent an invasion, and we pray that they may continue, and may succeed. We pray for people in positions of authority on both sides of this confrontation, that they may be enabled to work out a solution that will avoid violence.

And we continue to pray about the pandemic. We give thanks for the new anti-viral medication that was announced just this past week, and we pray that it may succeed in alleviating the symptoms of infected people, and keeping them out of hospital. We pray also for those with long-term symptoms of COVID, whose conditions are not well understood, and who often are not receiving the care and support they need. We pray that increased attention and action may be given to this condition, and that ways may be found to relieve people's symptoms, and restore them to health.

We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God; and we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

OFFERING

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:

God of love and generosity:

We give you thanks for the many blessings by which you sustain and enrich us. We thank you for providing the basic necessities of life, and for the freedoms and opportunities we enjoy. We thank you for the benefits of modern technology, and for the beauty of the world around us. Most of all, we thank you for your love for us, demonstrated in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

In gratitude, we now dedicate our offerings to you and to the work that your church does for you in the world. Guide and prosper that work, we pray, so that it may help you accomplish your saving purpose.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

HYMN: Sing them over again to me, wonderful words of life

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Sisters and brothers in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to return to your daily service for God,

listening always for his word,

as it comes to us through the scriptures.

And may God bless you:

May he sustain and guide you each day,

and give you his strength and peace;

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

CHORAL AMEN