“Respond”

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Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21

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***Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10***

***8 1all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. 2Accordingly, Ezra the priest 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.***

***5And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people, and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 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 worshiped 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.***

***9And 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.”***

***Luke 4:14-21***

***14Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee [from the temptations in the wilderness], and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region. 15He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.***

***16When 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:***

***18“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 set free those who are oppressed, 19to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”***

***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.”***

Nehemiah.

Who reads from the book of Nehemiah. How many of you have ever heard of the old testament book called Nehemiah?

The events of the book of Nehemiah take place about 500 years before the birth of Jesus. Nehemiah was an important figure in the court of a Persian king. Since Jerusalem, Nehemiah’s home town, had been destroyed by the Babylonians, the city was in ruins. The Persian king granted Nehemiah’s request to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls and repopulate the city with the exiled Jewish people. By the time we get to chapter 8, the work is completed and Nehemiah then gathers the people together.

Within the book of Nehemiah, this chapter 8 is a misfit. The earlier portion of Nehemiah is primarily about rebuilding Jerusalem. The later chapters in Nehemiah contain some terrible acts of violence. But this chapter 8 does not contain any of that, and in fact, seems to be a model of oneness.1

Although Jerusalem now has a new wall around it, this gathering of the people occurs in “the square before the Water Gate” which is actually located outside that wall. This is a public square, not a temple, not a place with entry requirements, not a place where people are divided, there are no insiders or outsiders, no designation of clean or unclean. *Any* who are interested may come and participate. “Both men and women and all who could hear with understanding” were present. One commentator writes, “Any person for whom the reading generates understanding, offers wisdom to discern, or brings back the memories of the good old days of living in community, as well as anyone who is listening to it for the first time and is excited about it, is welcome to listen.”1

As a model of worship, Chapter 8 of Nehemiah describes a welcome gathering of all the people without discrimination. People stand, say “amen,” bow down, raise their hands – worshipful responding to the word from the Torah. The word was read, interpretation given, understanding was offered. The blessing from Ezra the priest and scribe, Nehemiah the governor, and the Levites, the teachers, could have been the first Pastoral Blessing followed by the first coffee hour. *“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.”* Notice the instructions to share. The people gather, hear the words with interpretation, worship and then are sent on their way to enjoy their life with God. “The joy of the Lord is your strength!”

The pairing of this portion of Nehemiah, with our words today from the gospel of Luke is intentional. The model of worship in Nehemiah is most likely generally the same as the setting in which Jesus entered the temple.

People gathered in the temple as did Jesus, just like he had during his life time. People gathered, an attendant brought in scripture, the scroll was read and interpreted. But this time was different. Everyone there knew Jesus but so far he had not stood up to read and lead. “Is not this Joseph’s son?” they would ask. Good things were said about him. For about a minute. Just nine verses later Jesus has been chased out of town. A prophet, not welcome in his own town. More about that next week.

This story of Jesus in the temple is in all three of the synoptic, or similar, gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke. The differences matter in this case. First, this telling reveals the content of Jesus’ reading. And second, this Luke version occurs at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry as part of three Spirit led narratives told by Luke, which the season of Epiphany celebrates. Jesus’ baptism accompanied by the holy spirit, Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness where Jesus was driven by the Spirit, and empowered by the Spirit to read in the temple. Claimed, tested and now empowered, Jesus early ministry is ready. When the scroll was handed to Jesus, he turned specifically to Isaiah, chapter 61. Here’s what the first three lines of that text say:

Isaiah 61:1-3:

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners,****2****to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor*

and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, **3**to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

Those listening would have known all 11 verses of Isaiah chapter 61. They would have known how bold Isaiah’s full proclamation was in Chapter 61 and anticipated hearing the words contained there about all of the joy that shall be theirs. They were probably confused by Jesus only reading two verses, and not a complete second verse even.

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners,****2****to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor*

Jesus stopped before the second half of that line – to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God. He did *not* come to proclaim the day of vengeance of God.

Luke’s telling of Jesus’ baptism as well as Jesus’ time in the wilderness have confirmed to the reader of Luke that Jesus *is* the Son of God. “The 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness have demonstrated the *kind* of Son he is, his character, and *how* he will perform his ministry in relation to the temptations of unbridled power, authority, wealth, and risk (4:1–12).”2 And it is after that, now, for the first time, Jesus announces himself as the Messiah – the one everyone has been waiting for – to their surprise. Jesus, the son of Joseph and Mary, who they had all known since he was a child. Jesus came to tell them that the Lord anointed *him*. The Lord has sent *him* to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

This was Jesus’ mission statement. This is what Jesus will be about. Commentator Robert Brearly writes, “[Jesus] is declaring that his ministry in the Spirit as Messiah of God calls him to be an agent of mercy to the downtrodden in this world.”3

Epiphany is about what is revealed. In the three weeks thus far to the Season of Epiphany we have read about the revelation of Jesus to the wise men or the shepherds; the revelation of Jesus through his miracle of changing the water into wine; and now this third week of Epiphany brings us the revelation of Jesus as the anointed one. Anointed to usher in the year of the Lord’s favor.

For us on this day, in this time, we need to focus on our own personal mission statement. How has the Spirit prepared us for the mission we are working toward? We have been claimed in baptism, led and tested into the wildernesses of life, and must choose how we will be a part of this mission of Jesus’ ministry. To whom will be an agent of mercy?

Remember Mary, stating the truth and reality of the situation at the wedding in Cana – “they have no wine.” What is the truth and reality of our local and worldly situations? What does “they have no wine” translate to in our communities? Who will say these things?

“They have no wine.” They have no food. They have no protection. They are sick. They are lonely. They are scared. They have no one.

Who will say these thing? Who will hear them say it? Then, who will respond? You and I are called to listen to the calls and cries of those who suffer and respond. Yes, enjoy the fat and the sweet wine, but bring some to those who have none. Yes, we can have our own lives but we must always pay attention to those who state the truth and current reality. We are called to respond in ways that help bring about the year of the Lord’s favor, not the day of God’s vengeance.

Amen.

1<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-nehemiah-81-3-5-6-8-10-6>

Chukka, Helen, January 2025

2<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-414-21-6> Smith, Mitzi J., January 2025

3Brearly, Robert M., Working Preacher Commentary, Year C, Volume 1, pp.284-9.