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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Series C)

January 24, 2016

Text: Luke 4:16–30

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

For over seventy years, the children of Israel were without the regular reading and preaching of God's Word. They had been in Babylonian and Persian captivity, surrounded by pagan idols and false worship. God's people felt the taunting blows of derision from their captors. Psalm 137:1–4 reflects the anguished hearts the Jews felt in captivity:

¹By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. ²On the willows there we hung up our lyres. ³For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" ⁴How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?

But that had all changed now. The holy Land was being resettled under the political and military leadership of Nehemiah and the spiritual leadership of Ezra. The walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt and the Temple was under construction. The Lord God of Israel is doing something new in the midst of His people.

So, the people gather around Ezra to hear the Word of the Lord on the first day of the 7th month (vs. 2). This was no ordinary gathering. God's Word was to be read, proclaimed and explained so that all could hear, learn and inwardly digest the Bread of Life. It had been so long but the famine of hearing God's Word was at an end. So maybe you can understand why the reading and preaching went so long. Nehemiah wrote that they heard and studied God's Word "from early morning until midday." He also adds that "the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law." (Neh. 8:3) For up to six hours they feasted on divine words. The famine was over. God's enemies that had tried to frustrate His plans of reestablishing divine worship and learning were thwarted. "This day is holy to the Lord your God," Nehemiah declared, "do not mourn or weep." (vs. 9) "This day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." (vs. 10)

Today's divine service will not be a six-hour marathon. But we too are feasting on the Bread of Life – only better. After Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, He went about Israel's countryside preaching about the coming of God's end-time reign. Thousands of years of waiting were at an end. In the presence of Jesus, the Lord's joy and strength are given to all who need it; to all who hunger and thirst for His liberty and grace. The feasting was beginning; a feast of God's richest foods and best wine made manifest in Jesus of Nazareth.

The hometown son now becoming famous had returned to Nazareth. Rumor says that while Jesus was being baptized by that wilderness prophet, John, a voice from heaven was heard and that a dove suddenly appeared over Jesus. And then, there were the reports of Jesus changing water into magnificent wine at a wedding in Cana. The good Son has returned home and He's made us all proud.

You know how small towns react when their famous kids come back home. When's he coming home and where can we find Him? Well, He's coming back this Sabbath and we'll be able to see Him where He always was – in the synagogue. Good ole Jesus; going to church just like when He was a little boy sitting next to Joseph and Mary. He always was a good kid.

In honor of His return home, Jesus is handed the scroll of Isaiah the prophet. He is to read the appointed prophetic lesson for the day. I can imagine the hometown crowd wondering if Jesus might tell them what's been going on lately and explain all the strange rumors swirling about Him. The atmosphere must have been electric. Or so I like to imagine.

There it is. Isaiah chapter 61. Jesus begins to read with perfect clarity, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." He stops, rolls up the scroll and hands it back to the attendant. With every eager eye watching His slightest movement, they waited to see what He would say.

"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (vs. 21)

That's a bombshell of a statement. Those words of promise and hope could only be fulfilled by the Messiah. To be sure, they were spoken by Isaiah the prophet 700 years before Jesus' birth. But those are Messianic words if there ever were any. And Jesus,

the now famous son of Nazareth, returns home to declare that they are fulfilled in Him. Not only are they fulfilled in Him, those beautiful words are fulfilled at that moment in time. At that synagogue worship service; before their very eyes stands the Anointed Messiah who preaches good news to the poor and liberty to captives, who grants sight to the blind, who releases the oppressed, and proclaims authoritatively that this is the time of God's favor.

Today, dear saints of Immanuel/St. John's, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. Not in me, your pastor, but in Christ Jesus, your Lord and Savior.

The initial reaction to Jesus' preaching was positive. Vs. 22, "And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth." But then the contempt of familiarity begins to settle in. Vs. 22 continues, "And they said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'"

Things begin to turn sour pretty quickly after that. Vs. 23–24, "²³And he said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.'" ²⁴And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown." It gets bad, really bad, the anger becomes white hot, and the rejection murderous. Vs. 29–30, "And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, he went away." Who could have guessed that it would have come to this?

The readings from Nehemiah and Luke describe two different kinds of hearing of God's Word. Nehemiah describes the hearing of faith and obedience. Luke describes the hearing of unbelief and rejection. Both services proclaimed the promises of life and salvation. Both contained Law and Gospel preaching.

We should not fall into the error of thinking that the OT (i.e., Nehemiah) is Law and the NT (i.e., Luke) is Gospel. The Jews of Nehemiah's day heard the preaching of Moses: Genesis through Deuteronomy. Those books contain God's Law and God's Gospel. They heard and believed and rejoiced when the priest gave "the sense, so that the people understood the reading (vs. 8). "This day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." The Jews of Jesus' day heard only two verses – really only 1½ - and they became murderous in unbelief when Jesus gave "the sense, so that the people understood the reading."

The question before each of us, individual Christians, is which kind of hearing will we give to God's Word of Law and Gospel? Faith or unbelief? The truth of the matter is that you and I are a mixture of both, faith and unbelief, acceptance and rejection, often intermingled simultaneously. Our sinful nature, the Old Adam, does not believe and wants Jesus and His preaching to leave us alone. Our new nature, the New Adam, rejoices in God's Word and seeks to rejoice in it. Those two natures struggle against each other. Daily we repent of our sins, our inattention to God's Word and ways. Daily we receive His forgiveness, grace, and love.

The question before us as a Christian congregation is which kind of hearing will we give to God's Word of Law and Gospel? The Biblical message of truth is increasingly becoming more objectionable to our culture and society. Will we acquiesce to the social, political, and monetary pressures in order to be accepted? Or will we remain faithful even if that means being thrown off the cliff, so to speak?

I am confident that by God's grace, each of you individually and we collectively as a congregation will hear with faith and rejoicing. There will be mistakes, failures, and missteps. But what has our Lord said to us? This is the year of the Lord's favor. Liberty is given to the oppressed and captive. And He went through death and the grave to show us in truth, that His Law/Gospel preaching is true.

This day is holy to the Lord. God's people are gathered around His Holy Word and Sacraments. Faith is strengthened. Sins are forgiven. The Holy Spirit is active in our hearts and minds. And the joy of the Lord Jesus is our eternal strength.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.