



THE CENTRAL PULPIT

CENTRAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH | ATLANTA, GEORGIA

A TALE OF TWO SERMONS

January 31, 2010; the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Nehemiah 8:1-12; Luke 4:16-29

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[This morning, I want to thank John Tarrant, Clark and Leigh Campbell-Taylor, and Doug Roorbach who will join me in the reading of Scripture and its proclamation. Let us pray: *Prayer of Illumination.*]

Do not let the title mislead you. I am not about to preach two sermons, but only a tale of two sermons. The first sermon was preached by Nehemiah to exiles who had returned home from Jerusalem after over 50 years in captivity.

[Gary returns to the chancel chair and John moves to the lectern. The “chorus” stands and are focused exclusively on what John is about to say.]

[John reads Nehemiah 8:1-3]: All 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. ²

Accordingly, 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. ³ He 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.

[When John finishes the first reading from Nehemiah, the chorus speaks:]

First Voice:	Hush! Take your conversation elsewhere!
Second Voice:	Step aside, I can't see.
Third Voice:	He's mounting the platform.
First Voice:	He's opening the Torah.
Second Voice:	What are women doing here?!
First Voice:	And how about all these children?
Third Voice:	How will they ever understand what he will read?
First Voice:	Hush, I say! He's about to begin!

[John reads Nehemiah 8:4-12]: The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose . . . and he 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. ⁶ Then 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. ⁷ Also . . . the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. ⁸ So 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. ¹⁰ Then 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." ¹¹ So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." ¹² And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

[Gary returns to the pulpit.]

This scene is a preacher's wildest dream. The people call **themselves** to worship, tell the preacher to read and preach the Word of God, and then say, "Hey, we don't mind if the worship service lasts until dark." No one in the crowd suffers from the church disease that plagued my late father. The clinical name for the disease is "Pulpit Head Bobbing" or PHB, for short. The major symptom of PHB is the noticeable bobbing of one's head and the glaring with increased frequency at one's watch for every minute the worship service passes the noon hour.

No, in Nehemiah's almost magical worship scene, people of every age, male and female, come together and tell Ezra, "Read God's Word to us and make it come alive!" For one incredible moment, people tell Ezra, "Life can wait. We want to hear what God has to say to us."

"When you're trying to rebuild a world," writes David Buttrick, "you had better begin with the Word of God!" And the people who stood before the Water Gate in Jerusalem listening to Ezra read the Torah were doing just that. Their world lay in ashes around them. The few Jews who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon had managed to rebuild just one wall of the Temple. They longed for a word from God to give them the strength to keep building. To this expectant crowd, Ezra reads passages from Genesis through Deuteronomy. As he does, the Levites translate the Hebrew into Aramaic so all can understand.

In Nehemiah, the preacher's wildest dream continues as the people not only listen but grab hold of the words Ezra was preaching. Verse 12 celebrates, "All the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions [to those for whom nothing is prepared] and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them." Now, friends, that is worship!

Earlier, I said that this is a tale of two sermons. The setting for the next sermon shifts from Jerusalem to the Galilee, some four hundred years later.

[While John goes the lectern, the chorus stands and Gary remains in the pulpit, with all eyes on first John and then the chorus.]

[John reads Luke 4:16-17a]: When Jesus 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, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.

[After John finishes, the chorus speaks:]

Second Voice: The boy's back in town.

First Voice: He's no boy, you fool. He's a grown man.
 Third Voice: Have you heard the tall tales from Capernaum about him?
 Second Voice: Maybe he'll have some tricks for the home crowd!
 Third Voice: And why not? We helped raise him, didn't we?!
 First Voice: Hush, I tell you! They've handed him the Torah!
 Second Voice: Oh, I wish his mother could see this.

I preached my first sermon at the Covenant Presbyterian Church in Woodbridge, Virginia in April, 1975. I spent hours writing and crafting every word, every sentence, making sure that the sermon was sound and yet lasted no longer than twenty minutes. When an elder greeted me at the door after I pronounced the benediction at 11:25 a.m., he said, "Son, you're going to go a long way!"

Jesus preached a first sermon that was even shorter than mine. His response, though, was not nearly so favorable. Like Ezra, Jesus first reads God's Word from Isaiah: "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 let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then Jesus sits as was the custom of preachers in the synagogue and delivers his sermon in one concise sentence, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

[The chorus of voices stands as Gary says "hearing" and the Third Voice speaks with unabashed annoyance.]

Third Voice: Who does this kid think he is?!
 First Voice: Of all the audacity!
 Second Voice: This is Joe's boy, isn't it? He must have forgotten his roots!

To be fair to Luke, we hear none of these comments from the crowd after Jesus' short sermon. But Jesus notices something about the home crowd that prompts him to keep preaching. Having not yet learned the fine art of holding his tongue, Jesus tells the congregation two stories. His choice of material is both pointed and questionable.

[John returns to the lectern and reads Luke 4:24-29]: And Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They 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.

This time, Luke does describe the crowd's response to Jesus' first sermon. "When they heard [the sermon]," says Luke, "all the synagogue was filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of 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."

In Nehemiah, the people welcome God's Word. In Luke, they chase the incarnate Word of God out of the synagogue. To be fair, Nehemiah presents the glossy version of Jewish worship reborn in Jerusalem. Soon after Ezra's inspiring sermon, religious leaders would blame immigrants and foreign

wives for all their past problems. Soon, the good news of God for all people would take a decidedly restrictive turn and only tried and true-blood Jews would qualify as God's people.

When you read Nehemiah and Luke, one thing is clear. True worship makes a difference. Some years back, Ross MacKenzie, a former professor of mine, preached a seminary commencement sermon to those who would soon preach their first sermons. Using this text from Luke, McKenzie argues, "Jesus is not a cosmic pixie from Never-Never Land, sprinkling fairy dust on everyone with nothing required. For people who are hanging on by their finger tips over that pit of hell called despair – how will we know, when we are ready to let go and give up, unless we hear a voice from further down the pit, and it is Christ's voice, and it says: 'Hold on. You will overcome'."

True worship makes a difference, be it in Jerusalem or Nazareth or Atlanta. It brings us into the presence of the Incarnate Living God by the Water Gate and it leads us to the brow of hill to stand with Jesus. And, if we pay close attention to the first sermon of Jesus, true worship brings us to stand with Jesus *today*. We all hope that *someday* nuclear weapons will be fossils from this century, that *someday* the prison industry will not be one of the largest employers in the nation, that *someday* we will stop blaming the poor for their poverty, that *someday* we will see immigration as less a threat to our economy and more as a part of our national identity. *Someday*.

No, says Jesus sitting in the synagogue. "I mean *today!*" Surrounded by a hometown crowd of worshipers, Jesus says, "Welcome the outsider inside, *today!*" "Feed the poor, *today!*" "Heal the wounded, *today!*" "Inspire the despondent, *today!*" "Give hope to the hopeless, *today!*" "Empower the powerless, *today!*"

There was not one "Amen" shouted from the once enthusiastic crowd, but neither was there one person drifting off because worship had put her to sleep. For the people gathered by Jerusalem's Water Gate and those gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth, the word of God was not only spoken, it made a difference. It fired them up. Unfortunately, the hometown crowd in Luke's story is fired up for all the wrong reasons. They are offended by the not so subtle implication by Jesus that God's grace crosses every border. They do not need a wet behind the ears preacher boy telling them how God wants them to live and who God wants them to love. They try to get rid of Jesus, but unlike Jonah, he will not flee. They try to shut Jesus up, but even Roman torture and execution cannot finally accomplish that.

I will confess that in my darker and more exhausted moments, I sometimes wonder what difference worship makes or if worship makes any difference at all. Why all the bother and the hours spent to plan and lead and participate in worship, week after week, in the sanctuary, in Rand Chapel, in retirement homes, in hospital chapels? What difference can worship possibly make?

That self-indulgent wondering doesn't last long when I watch you stand on the streets in the cold of winter and the heat of summer on behalf of the Prince of Peace and on every Wednesday night when I watch you caress the tired feet of those who have been walking our city's street without a place to call home and in tender moments when I watch you hold each other with genuine compassion when a job has been lost or a diagnosis is bad or a loved one has died.

I know what difference worship makes when Sunday after Sunday, I hear music that touches my soul, watch liturgical movement that enlarges my vision, ponder liturgical art that makes visible the greatest claims of the Gospel, and hear water splash as it is declared that God's goodness far exceeds my brokenness.

True worship makes a difference. It always has. It always will, because it brings us into the presence of the Incarnate Living God. And, if you doubt that God's word read and sung and proclaimed and tasted in worship cannot change your life forever, read Nehemiah and Luke's sermons one more time.

AMEN