

**January 27, 2019**  
**Third Sunday after Epiphany**  
**Presbyterian Women's Sunday**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
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## **The Re-Discovery of the Word**

Nehemiah 8:1-12  
Luke 4:14-21

Guess what?

Our reading from Nehemiah celebrates the birth of a new element of worship.  
One that is pretty important in the Presbyterian Church.  
One that is central in our Sunday morning liturgy.  
One that we are part of right now! at this very moment.

The scribe Ezra stands on a wooden platform above all the people, opens sacred scripture, and reads from it.

Yes, our reading from about 400 BCE celebrates one of the first times scripture was read and then interpreted publicly by those with skills of interpretation.  
The birth of the sermon.

*I know . . .* Some of you might be groaning . . . so this is when those 20 minute Sunday morning naps began!! We have Ezra and Nehemiah to blame!

I am happy to be here preaching on this Presbyterian Women's Sunday. The book of Nehemiah tells the story of re-organizing and rebuilding a community that had been scattered and broken in the years of exile, and it's a good text for today, because we can all imagine that women were central in reorganizing and rebuilding that community. In fact, all of the five platforms of Presbyterian Women's ministry—"Nurture Faith," "Support Mission", "Work for Justice and Peace", "Build Community", and "Develop Leaders"—are central to what is going on in Nehemiah.

In today's reading, the temple had been rebuilt already, but this central place of Jewish religious life was exposed and vulnerable due to the crumbling walls and gates around Jerusalem that were nothing but ruins. Nehemiah worked hard to unite the people and rebuild the walls, and now everyone is gathered in front of the Water Gate to hear the word read.

The setting reminds me of a camp meeting or a tent revival. In contrast to temple worship which was male only, women and children were all present to hear the word read and interpreted on this festival day. Exposed to the shining sun and the fresh air, the people were all gathered around to hear God's word to their community. Ezra read the word and the Levite priests helped the people understand what it was saying. All this lasted from early morning til midday!

I'm struck by how the people wept and mourned when they heard the word, but how the interpretation of that word from their leaders was very different. Ezra, Nehemiah, and the priests told those gathered, "Don't mourn or weep. Go party! Eat rich food and drink something sweet and share with those who don't have food ready. This day is holy to our LORD. Don't be sad, because the Joy from the Lord is your strength!"

Why this wide range of interpretation?

We don't know what scripture Ezra read that day at the Water Gate. We know it was something from the Torah, as this is the period of time when the Canon was just getting organized.

So it's hard to know what provoked the people to mourn and weep. But maybe they were stuck. They were in a negative pattern of bad religion. Beating themselves up for the misbehavior of past generations, those who led Israel into exile and the ruin of their city. They could only see themselves falling short of God's high expectations.

I think it's safe to say that many of us have a complicated relationship with the Bible. We don't read it enough, and when we do, it's often hard to relate it to our lives in the modern world. Sometimes it's hard to know where to begin—Genesis? Which gospel? The Psalms? Paul's letters? And then there's the whole issue of biblical literalism—we know people who take everything in the Bible literally, and it's easy, with our more nuanced Presbyterian understanding of scripture, to sometimes long for the simplicity of a more fundamentalist understanding. Sometimes when I think of Bible reading, I think of legalistic times in my past faith life when I could never read the Bible enough, and I always felt bad about it. Our relationship with the Bible is complicated.

Which is why I love today's scripture so much. Because it honors the ways that scripture can lift us out of whatever heaviness we're experiencing, and open our eyes to God's joy and strength. Ezra and Nehemiah must've known the people needed a lift. They had worked hard. They were exhausted. And they were able to reimagine the words that were read that day to tease out a meaning that the people weren't able to see. Various versions of the phrase, "so the people could understand what they heard" appear five times in this short reading. The community worked together to come up with a revelatory word from the Lord for their lives. Through the reading and interpreting of the Word, the eyes of the blind were opened, good news was preached to the poor, and those who were oppressed were liberated to encounter joy from a God they had previously only experienced as a God of wrath.

So where is our Water Gate? Where is the place where we rediscover the abundant gifts that scripture has to give, if only we are open to its revelation? How are our eyes opened to a new way of thinking, a fresh understanding, a revived way of living?

When I was in seminary, I took a class that required us to open scripture and have impromptu Bible studies in unusual places. On public transportation, in parks, at homeless shelters, in the mall, in the lobby of the Georgia capital building in downtown Atlanta. We students had to get used to the embarrassing attention drawn by our reading scripture in public. We also had to welcome whoever joined us, and to be open to their interpretations of the word. In my experience, people who were homeless were the first to join. This was when I learned that many homeless people, at least in Atlanta, have excellent knowledge of scripture. Some of them have vast blocks of scripture memorized.

This class made me realize that sometimes the only thing we need to do to make scripture come alive again is to change our location. Our faith can get in ruts. The same lectionary cycle, the same devotional, the same weekly gathering with the predictable responses from all those attending Bible Study. But those of you who've been on mission trips probably know, when you read the Bible with people from a different background, you hear the Word differently.

Study the Bible with a group of refugees from Myanmar, and you'll never see it the same. Open that scripture at a homeless shelter for domestic violence victims, and new words you never heard stand out. Take a psalm with you out on skis to a winter field where the wind kicks up the snow and plays with it in the sun, blowing sparkly ghosts across the landscape. Read your Bible with a group of children! All of a sudden, a psalm has new inspiration, Job jumps off the page and is alive, Jeremiah is preaching right in front of you, Jesus is the hometown hero about to be turned into the hometown reject.

At the Water Gate, the faith of the exiles, bruised and battered from years of homelessness, was reshaped and made more vital, more full of joy and wonder. The Living Word of the Bible can do the same for us, if we put in the work of reading it, learning new interpretations, and understanding it in new ways.

I heard a sermon last week shaped by the Dr. King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail. The preacher, the Rev. Dr. Kevin Cosby, suggested that King's letter, so rich and instructive in Christian faith and understanding, could be the 28th book of the New Testament. Addressed to the moderate white clergy who were critical of King's nonviolent civil disobedience and were telling King to wait for better timing, the Letter from a Birmingham Jail urges believers to sit where struggling and oppressed people sit. "You can always tell when someone has captured the spirit of Jesus Christ, because when you have truly captured the spirit of Jesus Christ," Dr. Cosby said, "You are infused with the spirit of empathy."<sup>1</sup>

Empathy has a way of broadening our imagination and opening us to God working in ways beyond our experience. This imaginative element is essential in reading the Bible at the Water Gate.

I grew up in a church that recited the Apostle's Creed every Sunday. Maybe you did too.

Did you ever wonder about the great comma in that creed?

The great big comma that is stuck between the phrase, “born of the Virgin Mary” and the next line “suffered under Pontius Pilate”?

In the space of that one comma lies all of Jesus' life!

In the space of that one comma is a huge chunk of the New Testament—four different gospels telling of Jesus' healings, teachings, miracles, parables, and the way he insulted authority and challenged injustice and showed compassion on the outcast of society.

The opening line of the Presbyterian Women's website states, “We understand that scripture asks us to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world.” In the space of one comma is the missing blueprint for a way of life that Jesus laid out for all his believers, particularly in our Gospel reading from Luke.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says, “What the church does with its creeds and its doctrinal tradition, is flatten out all the images and metaphors to make it fit into a nice little formulation . . . if you want a God that is healthier than that, you're going to have to take time to sit with these images and relish them and let them become a part of your prayer life and your vocabulary and your conceptual frame. Which, again, is why the poetry is so important because the poetry just keeps opening and opening and opening whereas the doctrinal practice of the church is always to close and close and close until you're left with nothing that has any transformative power.”<sup>2</sup>

The word, my friends, has transformative power. Each time we read it, new possibilities emerge. Our imagination is sparked. Scripture, and our study of it, has endless possibilities to imaginatively work into the particularities of our lives and shape us into new people, God's people.

As the author of Hebrews writes, “God's word is living, active, and sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates to the point that it separates the soul from the spirit and the joints from the marrow. It's able to judge the heart's thoughts and intentions.”

Friends, let us find our Water Gate. Let us engage the power of the Word, to sit where other people sit, and view life from a wider lens than our own, limited view.

Let us pray:

O God, we thank you for this time and place where we can ponder your Word and its importance in our lives. Stir up our imaginations, that we might be lifted out of any rut our faith life has gotten stuck in. And may the power of your Living Word open our eyes to your ever-present love and light that is, right now, preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming release to prisoners, giving sight to the blind, liberating the oppressed, and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. In the name of the fulfillment of that scripture, Jesus Christ, we pray, Amen.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/mlk-birmingham-jail-1-letter-basis-of-stirring-pcus-service/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/walter-brueggemann-the-prophetic-imagination/>