

The Word is Fulfilled in (and for) Your Hearing

Luke 4:16-30

Post-Epiphany III

January 27, 2019

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

*Our text, And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Our text will draw our attention to the Gospel reading, but first I'd like to start in the Old Testament reading... a rare reading from Nehemiah. In fact, our three readings each Sunday are part of a 3-year series of pre-planned Scripture readings and, out of those 150+ Sundays over three years, this morning's Old Testament reading is the *only* reading from Nehemiah.

And yet, what an important reading it is! If you're not familiar with the book of Nehemiah, it is sort of 'part b' of/companion with the book of Ezra and these are part of the "histories" of the Old Testament – you have your books of Moses, your poetic books, the prophecies, and this fourth group of books called the "histories" ... the focus being the history of God's chosen people Israel during their habitation of the promised land and while they awaited the coming Messiah.

Recall that Israel's kingdom reached a peak with David and Solomon, but plummeted into sinful chaos, so that the Lord wiped

out the 10 northern tribes and delivered the two southern tribes into the hands of the Babylonians. After years of exile, those two remaining tribes (known as “Judah”, then eventually, this remnant was again referred to as “Israel”) were freed to return to their homeland, and – with the leadership of the scribe, Ezra, and the skilled lay-leader and governor, Nehemiah – they rebuilt Jerusalem and the city wall. While rebuilding, Ezra also led them to use anew the sacred writings, and they heard anew the Word of the Lord.

That’s where our Old Testament reading comes in... the scene of Ezra reading the Word of the Lord to the people. It’s fascinating to consider – especially as this is the religious ritual Israel would carry for the next 500 years until the time of Christ – that what we hear in our text can remind us so much of our Service of the Word – the opening up of the Word of God, all the people stand for the honored Reading, they listen and liturgically respond, “Amen, Amen” and bow in the presence of God, and then the proclaimer expounds upon and explains that reading: “They *read* from the book... and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” Then, reminding us of the Service of the Sacrament, they went about feasting on the fat of the sacrifice and the drink of sweet wine on that holy day.

That all sounds like a typical Sunday of Calvary Lutheran Church, doesn’t it?

If so, then there are lessons to be learned here, aren't there?

First lesson: the whole reason we see this scene of great importance is because they were now being *brought back* to the Word of God! Their fathers had formerly so rejected it and become indifferent to it that the Lord had allowed them to 'lose their identity' and be shipped off to Babylon, where he used those years of exile to bring them to repentance and remind them anew that He alone is God and worthy of their focus and worship.

Now, we can say we learned the lesson and sigh, "Wow, I'm so thankful I didn't have to go through exile to be brought into the Church." True... but that's not where the lesson of history ends. Oh yes, the people of subsequent generations kept the tradition of reading the Word and listening to sermons, but by the time Jesus came and said, "Today, this Word is fulfilled in your hearing," they had again grown complacent toward their need for this Savior... they had again grown comfortable in their sin... after all, they were keeping the traditions, they were showing up and listening to the Word and its sermons of explanation. They were going through all the motions correctly when the Messiah came. And yet, they still did not receive him. They marveled at his gracious words, but also asked, "Isn't this Joseph's son?"

Learn the lesson of Israel... The Word of God is not for your weekly rote exercises, and then for you to go live daily life without the Word of God. How many there are throughout the world who

may come each Sunday and go through all the motions, then – when called to repentance, when shown real-life examples of how the Word of God plays out in daily life, how daily life needs baptism and the baptismal life, they would rather deny their sin than be forgiven it. They would rather refuse mercy, than rejoice in God’s grace in the Messiah. You see, it’s not on Sunday morning that the followers of God forget to be followers of God; it’s during daily life. And if Christians do drop off from Sunday, it’s because daily life is *already* losing its foundation of Christ. We forget that the theological term “sin” happens in daily life, affects our standing before God in real life, harms our neighbor in real life... we forget that daily life utterly depends upon the Word of God having its way – not just with our customs, but with our hearts.

Now, all of this brings us to our text for this morning, from the Gospel reading. Jesus comes, not just to read the scroll and follow the ceremonies of the synagogue, nor simply to change the rites and customs of worship; Christ comes to change daily life: “Whoa,” some of you are saying right now, “ ‘To change daily life’? This sounds a little bit too much like American Evangelicalism, where it promises your best life now and, if you just give your heart to Jesus, your whole life will change.” No, that’s not how Christ comes to change daily life. Christ comes to redeem, redefine, and Christologically refocus daily life... to say, “yes, you may be oppressed in daily life, but the news of your liberty in eternal life and

your clear conscience before God will comfort you that God is not punishing or forsaking you as you endure daily life... so that daily life can be lived through the lens of utter dependence upon and certain comfort of free forgiveness and the eternal life you now have in the Christ.”

Christ comes – not to give you your best life now. He *would*, by the way, if that was the promise of Old... but the prophecies said God would send a Messiah to save you from your sins, to open your blind eyes to the light of the Gospel, to free you from your bondage to sin, death, and the power of the devil. Christ did not come to improve your self-esteem or make you younger or restore your hairline or improve your salary.

And, in our text, Jesus’ words seem to imply he knows that’s what the crowds are seeking: “Doubtless,” he says of their hearts, “doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself.’ What we have heard you did at Capernaum (the miracles he did), do here in your hometown as well.” They wanted to see him bring the perfection of the new creation right now, wanted to see him do miracles and wonders that could show them the gospel *they* sought. They had forgotten the Gospel was about the forgiveness of sins. They had grown cold to the promise of the coming Messiah. They had certainly not remembered that all of daily life depends upon a clear conscience before God so that eternity is not eternal condemnation but eternal life.

Jesus points out that their apathy, their forgetfulness of the Word of God, was not new with their generation, just as it isn't new in ours. Yet, Jesus points out how they haven't learned... indeed, their forefathers had Elijah, but it was only the widow of Zarephath – a non-Israelite - who benefited from the preaching of Elijah. Again, they had Elisha, but it was only Naaman the Syrian – a non-Israelite – who benefited from the preaching of Elisha.

So also, when the people of Israel heard anew the word of the Lord as proclaimed by Ezra. How they wept as they heard it anew and it pricked their hearts. And yet, how quickly they forgot that the point is not to keep the customs to clear one's conscience, but that those customs and that Word would point them to the Christ sent as fulfillment of their meaning of their worship... sent to clear our consciences and the threat of condemnation before God.

Learn from history ... the people of God can have the Word of God so freely theirs and yet despise it. God knows this so well, He even gives a commandment to forewarn us of not letting that Word go, but "Remember the Sabbath" and cherish hearing and learning God's Word.

And, if we are going to learn from history, let us also be comforted by history. For when the people wept at their sins, they were comforted: "do not mourn or weep. This day is holy to the Lord Your God." And their ears were filled with comfort by the Word and they were fed the benefits of the sacrifice – the fat of the meat and

the sweet wine of the feast. And *they* had only the foreshadowings of what we have... they lived in the age of *expectation*, not the age of divine *fulfillment*.

What comfort for us, what reason to cherish, that we have Christ, we have the One who came to fulfill their worship and God's Word – "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" – he says and proclaims that the age of fulfillment has begun. And that means, in this age of fulfillment, we have a far better sacrifice that occupied God's altar, and with that completed sacrifice of Calvary, we now have reason to rejoice in hearing anew that Service of the Word in which the Word of the Lord is read and explained, and in receiving anew the Service of the Sacrament in which the 'fat of the sacrifice' is given under earthly bread and the very blood of that sacrifice is given under the sweet wine of the feast.

In this Age, ought we seek signs and ask, 'Physician, heal thyself' when God has already proven his promises and authority to be so certain and true? Ought we not learn from the history of Israel that God has blessed us who were once the Zarephath widows and the gentile Naamans – those who had no business assuming the God of Israel would think on us – yet, He has been mindful of us and blessed us through the offering of His Son and now – in our hearing – the benefits of His sacrifice are brought to this service of Word and Sacrament..

To be sure, if the promises of God and authority of God are certain and true, then so also is the Law of God. And hearing it anew will prick us at the heart and will cause us to recoil... it will highlight our sin and even bring it back to our recollection where we had successfully suppressed it and it will remind us that the Old Adam is still very much about our necks: “Why would I go hear the Word of the Lord,” Old Adam says, “if the proclamation is going to remind me I’m a sinner... if the pastor is going to point out my sin... if I’m going to be painted into a corner of repenting, when I *could* go on in life suppressing my sin and convincing myself all is well and being my own lord?... Who needs this Law of God?”

If that’s the temptation, think back to Israel and its exile to Babylon – the prophets had *forewarned* them that if they continued in sin, they would know such fate; and it was only after they endured that fate and heard the Word anew that they realized God had forewarned them all along; if only they had listened to Him, they would have been spared so much in His loving shelter and care.

So also, friends, in this Age of Fulfillment, we ought not wait to experience the fate of condemnation, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth in deep regret – for *that* Babylonian exile will be forever; rather, we ought rejoice that we get to hear anew the Law of God and be forewarned by its preaching and be pricked at the heart by it... that the Lord cares for us so deeply He is willing to do the difficult work of showing us our sin and bringing us

to repentance. And then, *because the promises of God are not only a future hope to leave us longing, but because they are fulfilled in Christ*, what comfort to hear that *Today* – as long as each day is today – Christ himself, Christ the substance of true worship, the divine comfort in flesh and blood, Christ the long-promised Messiah now ours... what comfort to hear him say, “Do not mourn or weep, as if condemned before God; for this day is holy to the LORD your God. And he shares it with you; He shares with you the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, and He shares it in ways and instruments of Word and Sacrament – of washing and reading and expounding and feasting – that surpass all understanding... and he shares it with you that you may ‘Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine’ ... for this is the sweet wine of the divine sacrifice, the body of the perfect sacrifice... and its for you, for the forgiveness of sins and the strengthening of the faith that cherishes living by that Word of God.”

If Christ takes joy in being the fulfillment and substance of worship, in delivering to you the benefits of the Scriptures fulfilled, then, in the face of your sin and the troubles of this world – as Ezra told the people renewed in the Lord’s service to His people – “do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

In Nomine Iesu  
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul  
January 27, 2019