

Sermon, 21 January 2007—Third Sunday after Epiphany

Nehemiah 8:2-10; Psalm 113; First Corinthians 12:12-27; Luke 4:14-21

In two of today's passages, we hear of a public reading of Scripture. If you are like me, you are touched to see how far back our liturgical customs run: as stand to hear the Gospel read, as they stood for the reading of the Torah; and we sit, as they did, in order to reflect on what we have heard, fixing all eyes on the speaker. Both these occasions of public reading are momentous, though in different ways: Ezra reads the Torah to the Jewish people who have returned from exile in Babylon, hearing it again in their homeland for the first time in seventy years; Jesus reads Isaiah in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth, speaking for the first time of his mission. In both cases, we are meant to understand that only the words of Scripture are large enough and deep enough to contain all that the event signifies—and, of course, the marvel is that these words were not written for those inaugural occasions but arrived into those present moments handed down through generations, treasured and vibrant. To call it a marvel is not accurate; it is the miracle of Scripture to remain alive in our midst. That is one of the ways we know God is present in those words, because they retain their life generation after generation. Today I am beginning a brief series of reflections on the Liturgy of the Word, the first half of the Eucharist. I will speak about the role of Scripture in liturgy today; next Sunday, the role of the Creed; and the Sunday after that, the role of the Prayers of the People.

We must start by asking whether or not fish are ever aware of water. We swim in Scripture. At every Eucharist, we not only incorporate four passages particular to that day, we hear echoes of Scripture in every prayer and every hymn. Even the Eucharistic Prayer has, embedded in its core, a passage from Scripture, quoting Jesus' words at his last meal with his

disciples and describing his actions, which are reenacted as they are spoken. So saturated is our worship with the words of Scripture, that we are pressed back into a receptive state. We hear more than we can incorporate, more than we can conceive, more than we can assimilate, more than we can recall, more than we can question, more than we can apply to our life, more than we can give thanks for. This can have one or another effect: we will either be suffocated with words and sink into bored or irritated unconsciousness, or be supported by their waves and float in open and attentive contemplation.

Learning to float in those words is an ongoing experiment of trust and openness to God. The stance we adopt as these words are read will give us a glimpse at the posture we take on as we face the world. This is not simply the difference between interested and distracted. It is more significantly the distinction of resistance or receptivity. Am I willing or not to let what I encounter transform me? This has nothing to do with our piety. The most vociferously pious are often like those who proclaim themselves the best of mothers as they tell their children what they need, what they think, what they feel; they have the moral of the story ready to slap on before the reading has reached its conclusion. And I would not know how to place my bet if I were asked whether the right or the left phalanxes of our church have done more to hammer God's Word into slogans.

So the first wonder of our liturgy is that we open up space for the words of Scripture. No matter how self-centered your prayers, no matter how self-deceptive my sermons, no matter how perfunctory our Eucharist, the liturgy itself makes room for the words of prophets and apostles, who, if we can be correspondingly open to all their words, correct our wailing and whining and wondering. Paul reminds you that we are all members of one body; how can foot or hand or eye center on itself and say either "I do not

belong” or “I have no need of you”? So, as with the squabbling competitive self-indulgent Corinthian Christians, your prayers can be informed by a vision of the whole, if you have ears to hear. And Nehemiah reminds me that the message to be brought is not my own, but God’s; how can my interpretation deceive me, and therefore mislead you, if I stick close to the text? So, as with the frightened weary Hebrew refugees from Babylon, my sermons can be accountable by not deviating from the comfort and courage God has always provided to those in covenant with Him, if I have ears to hear. And Luke reminds us that Isaiah’s words are a perennial proclamation of freedom from bondage; how can our response be perfunctory, our gratitude non-committal, our communion thoughtless? So, as with those attending service that Saturday morning in Nazareth, so also here in Saint Cloud, our Eucharist can be an eruption of thanksgiving that today, today, today, the Word of God is fulfilled in our presence, if we have ears to hear the Spirit in the text, and so learn to hear the Spirit in the person next to us, and finally truly come to hear the Spirit in the depths of our hearts.

The goal is to have our liturgy and our life take the same shape. At this juncture, the room our liturgy makes for Scripture, the readiness to hear all of it on its own terms, without fearing its contradictions and ferocity, without grabbing its consolations and beauty, this same patient ample welcome can be ours for life. We can cultivate in our life the same respectful attentive acceptance that our liturgy teaches us, because God is also active in the reversals and pleasures of our life, if we have ears to hear.

But we will not recognize God’s voice if we do not become familiar with its tones and shape in the history of the people of Israel and in the stories of Jesus and his followers. This task of holding yourself open to the Voice of God is nothing trivial or quickly accomplished. We always prefer

the moral, the idea, the point, so we can dispense with the story—as if stories were only told to teach, and as if each story were an anecdote in a rule book. We are already murmuring the punch-line before the joke has piled up the crest of its wave, and so we miss the cataract as the laughter breaks around us. And ultimately, when the point of the story that we have embedded into our soul hardens into a callus, we come to understand the value of this strategy of knowing ahead of time who God is and what God says: we will not be open to surprise, we will not be vulnerable, we will not be turned over or around or on. We will be immune from the all of the life-threatening contagions carried on the breath of the Holy Spirit.

To hold yourself open, each time Scripture is read, is to participate over and over in the interventions of God, who stretches out a mighty hand to liberate, who makes a covenant with the outcast, the second son, the barren woman, the nomad shepherd, the captive people, even with the unclean, who enjoyed walking with us in Eden, but who did not shun praying as us in Gethsemane, and who died and rose for us from a garden tomb. Your willingness to respond to God's Word can be your recollection of God's willingness to respond to us, at every point of our contradictory and beautiful life. Your readiness to listen will become your ability to witness as the vocabulary of salvation becomes comfortable in your mouth. Your receptivity will become your responsiveness, as you begin to see in your life occasions like those in which you heard that God acted, and you will begin to act on God's behalf, to open the eyes of the blind, to loosen the yoke of the oppressed, to proclaim good news to the poor, and to announce the year of Jubilee, in which all debts are remitted and all freedom restored.

Now, a final word: enshrined in the words we hear each Sunday is the most mysterious truth about Scripture. All of our Christian Scripture is the

result of the same process I have been describing. All the texts that we revere as the revelation of God's love and life in Christ are nothing more than the words of people who faithfully and carefully listened to Jewish Scripture, then wrote commentaries on the life of Jesus and the practices of his followers in that light. Because, Sabbath after Sabbath, they had taken on the shape of the words and acts of God in the Torah and the Prophets and the Psalms, they recognized that shape when they saw it in Jesus, and they were able to tell his story as the continuity of God's commitment to humanity, deepened into their own flesh. They proclaimed in Christ the fulfillment of God's promises; but without knowing those promises, they would not have recognized their fulfillment. Their openness, their reflection, their response, itself became the Word of God for us, because their being open and reflective and responsive allowed their words to conform to what God has always spoken and God's truth to shine in them.

Because God's Word is never silent, Jesus in Nazareth was able to say, "today these words are fulfilled in your presence." It was not because he was there to make God's utterances true—there is no deficiency in the Word of God. It was not because God's utterances are only true in him—there is no limit to the Word of God. It was not because those listeners were more worthy—there is no partiality and no prejudice from the Word of God. It is not because those listeners were more alert—there is no sensitivity and no subjectivity within the Word of God. These words are fulfilled in your presence today—yes, yours—because all things necessary for salvation are there: all the abundance of the Spirit's blessing, all the knowledge of the Spirit's wisdom, all the acceptance of the Spirit's compassion, all the reality of the Spirit's life. It is all already there, and—if you have hearing ears and a softened heart and open hands—today it is fulfilled in your presence. You

have only to pick up the promise and convert it into praise, which will endure, in the presence of the one God, Eternal Source, Only-begotten Word, and Life-giving Spirit, for all eternity.