

*Sermon for 3 Epiphany, Year C*  
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*Holy Nativity, Plano*  
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If I went in for cute sermon titles, the title of today's sermon would be "A Tale of Two Scrolls". Our first scroll is found in the book of Nehemiah. This story is about the people who have returned from exile in Babylon. The Persians have taken over the Babylonian Empire and have allowed the exiles to return to their patriarchal homes. But the Persian province of Judea is very weak, both politically and spiritually. Nehemiah is an Israelite who is also a high-ranking official at the Persian court. And he has asked for a leave of absence to go and strengthen the Israelites in Judea. As our reading begins, he has just goaded the people into completing the wall around Jerusalem, a major political achievement. Now he and Ezra the priest are undertaking the spiritual renewal of the people.

The people are all gathered together; men, women and children who are old enough to understand what's being said. And Ezra and his assistants climb up onto a big stage so that everyone can see them. And they unroll and read the scroll (or more probably scrolls) of Torah, God's law and the story of his faithfulness to his people. But there is a further problem. Most of the people don't understand Hebrew anymore. The language of the empire is Aramaic, and that is what they speak. So all these Levites with the unpronounceable names are given the task of translating and explaining the scripture in a language the people can understand.

As the people listen to the Torah, they begin to weep. They weep because they realize how badly they have failed to keep faith with God. They have not even kept the very basics of the covenant. They have married their sons and daughters to pagans. They are not keeping the Sabbath. They are not supporting the priests, the Levites, or the Temple service. And at the same time they realize all this about themselves, they also realize how worthy God is of their faithfulness. They are hearing the story of how God called their forefather Abraham, how he was faithful to their family and tribe over the years and the generations, how he brought them out of Egypt and remained faithful, even when they were rebellious and wayward.

And so they weep. This is an altogether appropriate response to the truth about ourselves. How many of us can say that we are in a better state than these Israelites? Granted, we don't choose husbands and wives for our children anymore. But how many of us have raised children in the knowledge and fear of the Lord, so that they would know better than to join the rest of their lives to someone who didn't believe in God? How many of our children have learned the pagan way of life far better than the Christian way? How many of us have structured our own lives around our service to God? How many of us keep time dedicated to him, much less a whole day? How many of us offer a full tithe for the work of God in the world? These are the basics of faithfulness, and there are very few of us who fulfill them.

So mourning and weeping is a suitable response to knowledge of ourselves. But it is never an adequate response to God. Our own failures are never the end of the story. Because it's not about us, it's about God. He is the one who is faithful. He is the one who will make us righteous. He is the one who will make all things new. Instead of encouraging the mourning that has sprung up spontaneously, Ezra teaches the people to focus on the celebration. "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to him 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." Our strength is not in knowing the truth about ourselves, as necessary as that may be. Our strength is in the joy that God has in himself, the joy of being in a right relationship with reality, the joy that God gives to us, the joy of knowing that all *shall* be well, because God is good enough and smart enough and powerful enough to make it so, the joy of witnessing the evidence that all this is true.

Now skip forward about 470 years. Those four and a half centuries have not particularly advanced the political security or the spiritual maturity of God's people. But there is this young man from Nazareth. They say he was baptized by John in the Jordan, but that God spoke from the sky and blessed him. And then, they say, he spent forty days in the wilderness wrestling with the Devil. Here in Nazareth, we watched him grow up. Of course, you know Joseph wasn't really his father... Uh, huh. He's a little strange, but a nice boy all the same. We're glad he's doing so well. And we can't wait to see what's really happened to him.

So Jesus comes home and goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath. They let him read and teach on the scripture, because they're curious about what he's going to say. This is our second scroll. They hand him the scroll of Isaiah, from which he is free to choose a passage. So he rolls the scroll almost all the way to the end and reads a passage from what we know as chapter 61. All of this is completely unremarkable, except that he has chosen a passage that is pretty clearly one about the shadowy servant/messiah figure that keeps popping up in the prophecies of Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." That's sort of exciting. Wonder what he's going to say about that?

He rolls the scroll up. He hands the scroll back to the person who gave it to him. And he sits down. Now in our culture, sitting down means you're finished. But Jesus didn't just go back to his place in the assembly. When a rabbi taught, he sat down to do it. So Jesus is taking up an authoritative posture. He stood up to read, but he sits down in order to teach. He's wound them all the way up. They're all waiting for him to speak. And what does he say? "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus doesn't just teach on the passage. He claims the passage. He doesn't just say, "I'm the Messiah." He presents himself to them as the fulfillment of all the promises of God. And he has identified his hearers as the poor oppressed blind captives to whom he has just proclaimed good news. It takes them a while to figure out whether to be offended or not. But that's because they aren't like the people weeping at the reading of the Law. Because they don't recognize themselves as the poor oppressed captives, they don't immediately respond in joy to the rescuer. But that makes him no less the promised Messiah of God.

Jesus is the one who proclaims the good news of forgiveness to the people who are crushed in their sin. He is the good news of deliverance and salvation to the people who are captives and slaves of the devil. He is the light of the world, giving sight to those who cannot see reality. He is the one who gives dignity and value to the victims of every kind of injustice. He is the one who has conquered Satan, thrown down death, and made righteousness possible for all of us.

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." God offers us the joy of knowing Jesus. He presents himself to us through the reading of this passage, just as he presented himself to the people of Nazareth. Just like them, we are, in a way, too familiar with him. We know the stories about him. We use his name every day. But when he reveals himself to us as the fulfillment of everything we ought to desire, what is our response?

If we do not know we are poor, we will not respond well. If we do not recognize our failure and neediness, then the glory of the Redeemer will fall flat with us. Sooner or later, we will be driving him out of our lives, just like the Nazarenes eventually did.

But here is the “joy of the Lord” in the flesh! He is not just the cause for celebration. He *is* the celebration! He is joy. And he is our strength. If we will receive him as the Lord and deliverer that he is.

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