

## JOYFUL FEASTS

Epiphany 3, Year C: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10  
Psalm 19  
Luke 4:14-21

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**Key Passage:** *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor."* (Luke 4:18a)

*"Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared."* (Nehemiah 8:10a)

"You only get one chance to make a first impression." Have you heard that saying? Jesus is beginning his ministry. People are paying attention.

Last week, we read of the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the gospel of John. His first deed, or "sign," was to change water into wine so that a wedding feast could proceed with joyful celebration. Today we begin our study of Luke's account of Jesus' ministry, which we will continue for most of the year. Jesus has been in the wilderness of temptation, where he has wrestled with questions of his power and his trust of God. He emerges, "filled with the power of the Spirit," ready to begin his work in Galilee. He teaches in the synagogues. Reports about him begin to spread. People are paying attention.

Jesus goes to the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth and is given a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He chooses this passage: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... 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, to the astonishment of the congregation, he announces that "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

People pay attention best right at the start of something momentous. Maybe you are already anticipating the first sermon of our new rector, Morgan Allen. I can imagine that he will look carefully at the lectionary as he begins his preaching, finding something to set a tone for what will emerge in the ministry he will share with Trinity Church.

I am reminded of a story I heard many years ago about Conrad Hilton, the founder of the huge hotel chain. Hilton was appearing on a radio program in the days when virtually everyone listened to their radios for news. The interviewer asked the hotel magnate what was the one thing he wanted people to hear from him. Hilton paused to think. The host prompted him, "The whole country is

listening.” Then Hilton said, “OK, what I want people to know is this: put the shower curtain on the inside of the tub.”

So what does Jesus say when the whole town is listening? He speaks of good news for the poor, release to captives, healing, freedom. He identifies with God’s historic concern to bring relief to the oppressed, the needy, and the diseased. God’s desire is for our healing and wholeness, individually and as a people. Jesus announces that this will be his ministry. As followers of Jesus, this is our agenda too.

How well do we model the good news that Jesus preaches? Are healing and freedom the first words people think of when they look at the followers of Jesus, the church? Radical welcome? Good news for the marginalized? Release from all that holds us captive? Or do they see internal struggles for power and privilege, words of exclusion, unwillingness to change, battles over dogma, guilt, rules, taking care of buildings rather than people...the list goes on. Where is today’s good news for all who are suffering?

Today’s first reading sounds a similar theme of good news. The exiled people of Israel are starting to return to their historic homeland to begin the years of rebuilding. The scribe Ezra is to help re-establish worship in this time of new beginning. Ezra holds a public reading of a portion of the Torah. We learn, in phrases to gladden the heart of any preacher, that “the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law” (Neh. 8:3b) and that the reader “gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (Neh. 8:9b).

We don’t know the content of that reading, but we do see the people’s reaction to hearing the words: they begin to weep. Perhaps they are being moved by hearing something precious that has been denied for a long time. Perhaps they are expressing remorse at failing to live up to the law. Have you heard God’s word in ways that made you weep, or feel uncomfortable, or become angry? Is that a sign of your wish to change, or is it a sign of resistance to a hard truth?

In today’s Gospel, Jesus gives his opening sermon. Next week we will read a continuation of the story. The people who have seemed proud to welcome him home become angry at his words, and they turn to violence. We have strong reactions when our assumptions and privileges are challenged. It’s not just about those people of Nazareth or Jerusalem. I urge you to read the book *White Fragility*. It is subtitled, “Why it’s so hard for White People to talk about racism.” It’s a best-seller that is shaking a lot of our assumptions. We will talk about the book next Sunday at 12:30. It’s an alternative to going away mad. It’s a chance to think about what we white people need to know so that we can become part of God’s desire for racial healing.

Let’s look at the response of Ezra and Nehemiah when they see the people weeping: “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep,” (Neh

8:9b). Nehemiah offers an alternative to despair or remorse at hearing God's word. He declares a feast! He says: "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine." And the feast is not just for the hearers; it is also for those who are hungry and in need. Nehemiah continues, "Send portions of [the food and wine] to those for whom nothing is prepared." Carry out God's message of justice as part of your celebration.

This is the response that God wants to see: rejoicing and sharing: "Do not grieve," says Nehemiah, "for the joy of the Lord is your strength." (Neh 8:10). I love that phrase: "the joy of the Lord is your strength." God doesn't want our tears. God wants us to rejoice. The good news of God's working in the world is cause for joy, not despair. God's spirit leads us into a celebration that spills out and over all those in need.

One of my favorite movies is *Babette's Feast* (1987), based on a story by Isak Dinesen. Two spinster sisters, Martine and Philippa, lead an austere life in a small village in Scandinavia in the late nineteenth century. They have given up love and marriage and other "worldly pleasures" to follow their father's role as a leader in a puritanical Lutheran sect. Into this cold and colorless world comes the Parisian Babette. She devotes herself to caring for the sisters and running the household so that they can concentrate on spiritual matters.

Babette was a chef in Paris, so she is skilled in the preparation and presentation of good food, though her talents are largely wasted on her employers who eat in stony silence, apparently only interested in food as a way to sustain life. After years of waiting, when Babette inherits some money, she finds an opportunity to prepare a truly sumptuous meal for her mistresses. She spares no expense in assembling the finest ingredients and spends days in preparation. The result is an elaborate feast in which there is much enjoyment, laughter, and unaccustomed conversation. Babette's loving gift brings an experience of grace and beauty that is life-transforming for her Scandinavian employers.

The movie is a metaphor for our life in the church. The message that Jesus proclaims is life-giving: God loves us extravagantly. When we receive and live the beauty of the message of love, we experience the power of Christ and we invite others into that feast. Coming to hear God's word and especially at the table of Eucharist, we hear Jesus offering us healing of all that wounds and binds us. He equips us with power to work for relief of oppression as we live freely and lovingly for ourselves and for others.

When we hear the Word of God, we are not to despair. "Don't cry," says Nehemiah. "Hold a celebration, enjoy wine and butter, and make sure that the hungry get a share. For the joy of the Lord is your strength." Doing God's work is our joy. It arises from our own sense of being loved and forgiven. It

takes effort—lifelong—to learn to respond. Working together, we learn to trust each other and to find ways to bring loving light into God’s world.

We work to lift the oppression of racial injustice as we interrogate white supremacy. We work for criminal justice reform through legislation and through mentoring prisoners seeking an education. We reach out to feed the homeless and support refugees as they find new lives. We create a library to help young people experience the joy of reading. We bring the feast of Communion to those on the streets and on sick beds.

Not every effort we make will produce all the results we would like. But in the providence of God nothing is ever wasted. We will see our efforts magnified beyond our own abilities. And God draws near as we respond in joyful trust. That is the message of Epiphany. “Joy to the world; the Lord is come.”