

## **The Word of the Lord**

Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Luke 4: 14-21

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### *Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10*

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those 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."

### *Luke 4: 14-21*

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me 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." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

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*On. In.* These two simple prepositions sometimes have a world of difference between them. We can read, hear, Scripture, and just let it wash by us as old, familiar words and stories that just rests on us, on our minds, on our hearts, or perhaps we hear anew a passage we've read many times before, and now that rests *on* our minds, *on* our hearts. The words of Scripture are there on our hearts; they sit with us, quietly, subtly, shaping us, encouraging and teaching us. They are part of the background of our days.

But then there is a life event, or a world event, an experience that breaks our hearts, that challenges us, that hurts us, that leaves us struggling and confused, and God's comfort and encouragement will pour those holy words *in* through all the cracks of our broken hearts.

This is the insight from a story that Anne Lamott shares in her book *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*<sup>i</sup>, as she tells of a Hasidic rabbi who always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put Scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, "Why on our hearts, and not in them?" The rabbi answered, "Only God can put Scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your heart, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside."

"The holy words will fall inside." When the holy words fall inside our tender hearts we are reminded that the Word of God is the breath of God.

We all have those times in our lives when our world has caved in, when times are dark and bleak, when our prayers are joined by our tears. We trust, we hope, and we rely, that the holy words will fall inside our troubled hearts.

This was indeed the experience of the people gathered in Jerusalem at the newly rebuilt Water Gate as Ezra the Scribe read the powerful teachings of the Lord, the Law of Moses, for 7 straight hours. The crowd was attentive, they were needy. Recently returned from exile, they were socially, culturally displaced as they are home but not home. The temple has long ago been destroyed and is merely rubble and ruins. They cannot understand the Hebrew of other Jerusalem residents as Aramaic has become their language over time. Now, Ezra has given them this rare opportunity to hear the word of God, to place it on their hearts. Nehemiah and other leaders guide them through the Scripture so that with understanding it will rest on their hearts. As the holy words fall inside their hearts, the people weep as they recognize and accept how they have fallen short of God's expectations yet healing and assuring holy words fall inside also with the reality that "the joy of the Lord is your strength." The rebuilding of a community, of a temple, of a right relationship with the Lord begins.

As our faith ancestors in Jerusalem saw firsthand, the holy words fall inside our broken hearts—hearts broken not only by a hard situation, a painful challenge, but also hearts broken because they are contrite, they are repentant. As they wept upon hearing Ezra's words, the words of the Psalmist<sup>ii</sup> echoed too, "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." They acknowledged that they had forgotten how much they were loved and cared for by God, that they had let their egos take hold, that they saw others as a threat to themselves.

Reading sacred text puts Scripture on our hearts, it puts the Word of the Lord, the breath of God on our hearts. How profound this was for the people of Jerusalem.

How profound this was for the people of Nazareth. The congregation at the synagogue in Jesus' hometown gathered for worship on the sabbath day, and on this particular day there was a special guest among them. Jesus, the carpenter's son who had left town to become an itinerant teacher and preacher has gained quite a following, and a mostly positive reputation already in his short career, will be reading the Scripture. This was the little boy, the teen, the young man, they had seen each sabbath, and on holy days, who they had seen around town with his family, his friends, who worked as an apprentice with his father, Joseph. Some of them probably owned a piece of furniture that he built, or a farming tool that he had repaired.

As Jesus unrolled the scroll of Isaiah handed to him, he chose these verses:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me 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."

Jesus' words at first fell *on* the congregation's minds and hearts. They heard the familiar words of the prophet, but in a different voice. They watched him with the delight of a community for one of their own who has achieved some success. They listened to his voice, his cadence, as worship and as pride in him.

As Jesus turned and sat down, he turned to all the people looking at him with full attention, and the holy words *on* their hearts fell *inside* as he spoke, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

These are Jesus' first words of his public ministry in Luke's Gospel. What Jesus says here represents the heart of his message. Jesus makes it clear what his mission and his ministry are all about. He has been anointed by the Spirit of the Lord and sent to bring good news, to bring radical change, to those who are impoverished, imprisoned, and desperately hungry for good news. These are the words that fell into the hearts of people who had known him his whole life.

What are some words of Scripture that have fallen *into* your hearts, words that once sat with you, but then in a time of crisis or confession, they were poured out into the cracks of your broken heart and now you draw on them for strength, guidance and encouragement?

What are some words of Scripture that have fallen *into* your hearts, words that bear you up when you are weak, sustain you when you are troubled, call you out when you stray, bring you peace in times of trouble?

One of the Scriptures that has fallen deeply into my heart is actually not one that would come to mind for many. It is not one found on a cross stitch nor on a Pinterest board, yet has been my touchstone in times of searching, questioning, insecurity.

From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For "In him we live and move and have our being"<sup>iii</sup> These words in the Book of Acts remind me that we are each born for a particular time, place and purpose, come what may, and we are always in the presence of God—the source of our life, movement and being.

What are some words of Scripture that have fallen *into* your hearts?

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Lamott, Anne. *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*. Riverhead Books, 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> Psalm 51:17

<sup>iii</sup> Acts 17: 26-28a