



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Epiphany 3 (C)
January 23, 2022

RCL: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

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

The book of Nehemiah is a continuation of the story found in the book of Ezra. These two books tell the story of the return of the Israelites to Jerusalem after exile. It is in these two books that they rebuild the Temple and the wall of Jerusalem. Ezra oversees the rebuilding of the Temple and Nehemiah, the wall. After rebuilding both of these important symbols of the religious power of God and the political power of God, the people gather. That is where our portion of the reading today picks up the story.

We are told that all the people (men, women, and anyone who can hear with understanding) gather together to hear the Torah read. What is significant is that this is the first public reading and teaching of scripture for the Hebrew people. Nehemiah is bearing witness to the first service of the word. The tradition of reading scripture and interpreting it begins in this passage. Although this group is celebrating the completion of the temple and the wall, by reading the Torah aloud to all people, they are also recognizing that the people share in God's power by understanding God's word. Their interpretation of the scripture focuses on the joy of God, not on the demands of God's law.

- Are there traditions that you are starting that could continue for 3,000 years? How do you think they might change over that time?
- When you interpret scripture, do you focus on the demands of God? Or the joy of God?
- Where do you see God's joy in your life?

Psalm 19

This psalm is divided into two distinct parts. In verses 1-6, the text tells us that God is revealed and shown through the nature that God has ordained and created to show how powerful God is. Nature does not need words to tell of God's power, which can be seen in the rising and the setting of the sun every day. Verses 7-13 tell how wonderful God's law is, and that living according to God's law will bring joy and "light to the eyes." It also reminds us that God's law is more precious than gold. The things that we think are valuable in our society do not compare to a life lived following God; in verse 14, we hear the oft-quoted line: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer." Many priests choose this prayer to open their sermons. This line reminds us that it is both our words and our thoughts that God knows and discerns.

- Where do you see the power and glory of God in nature? Where have you been able to discern God's power by observing the natural world?
- When have you experienced God's love and joy as being more important than gold?
- How has God's work in your life made your heart rejoice?
- Do you believe that the words of your mouth and the meditations of your heart are acceptable to God? Why or why not?

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

This letter was written by Paul to an early Jesus-believing community in the city of Corinth. In this section of the letter, Paul is promoting egalitarianism despite differences. He uses a metaphor that was often used by the Romans in their political arguments. They would argue, unlike Paul, that certain parts of the body were more important than other parts. They used the body to prove that some people were more valuable than others. Paul uses their own metaphor to exalt the lowly and show the community of Jesus-followers that they needed to be different than the Romans. Growing up in the church, I have heard this passage many times, and it has become very familiar. But now that I realize that Paul was trying to use a familiar metaphor to do something new: to disturb the powerful assumptions about hierarchy. ¹

- Do you believe that all parts of the body are equally important? How would you demonstrate it?
- What are current metaphors that you believe need to be reinterpreted, like Paul reinterpreted the Roman metaphor of the body?

Luke 4:14-21

Luke's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry makes a passage from Isaiah (61:1-2) the focal point. Jesus has just been tempted and survived. He had been filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit then empowered him to enter his hometown and read this passage aloud. Here, Luke is showing us what has already been made clear in his Gospel account: Jesus has come for the poor and oppressed, those excluded from society. The song that Mary sang (Luke 1:46-55) when she found out she would bear God's son made clear that this was a Son of God who came to bring good news to the poor. Now, Jesus is telling us, using the scriptures, what the rest of his life will be about. However, Jesus only includes half of the final verse he quoted from Isaiah. The full verse of Isaiah 61:2 is: "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn." God's favor also includes God's wrath.

- Who are those currently excluded, who you can bring the Good News of Jesus to?
- What does the year of the Lord's favor mean to you? Do you think of favor as including wrath?

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¹ Coogan, Michael David, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol A Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS. The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version: With the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible. Oxford [England]; New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pgs 2016-2017.