

So, I was thinking of having everyone gather down at the east end of First Street close to the interstate, maybe there in the parking lot of the Kum and Go. And I was going to read and interpret scripture for you from, let's say, 7:00 a.m. to about noon. Five hours of God's word to celebrate the way that God has kept God's promise to us.

Sound ok? We could just move down there now...

That's what we hear in today's first lesson. In fact, this is a rare instance of a rather complete description of ancient Jewish worship. Nehemiah, the governor of Jerusalem, and Ezra, priest and scribe, have gathered all the people at the square before the water gate. But actually, this wasn't just an everyday Sabbath gathering, this was a special day. The people were back. Back from exile into Jerusalem. The walls and the gates had been rebuilt and it was time to begin to rebuild their connection to the law, to the Torah. So shortly after the rebuilding work was completed, Nehemiah and Ezra gathered the people in this place.

And it's a fairly extraordinary telling.

First of all, the place. They are gathered, we hear, at the square before the Water Gate. What we know about that space is that it was on the East side of the city outside the temple, so it was a place where everyone could be present, even the ritually unclean. And we hear over and over in this text that everyone *was* present. All the people gathered, both men, women and all who could hear with understanding—that's children. The ears of all the people were attentive... Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people... All the people answered "Amen, Amen." All the people or a variation of the same is repeated nine times in these verses.

Not only that, but there is attention drawn to those unable to be there. The group is charged with sending portions of food for whom nothing is prepared and they do just that. The experience of worship includes everyone, all the people.

Second, the worship experience is powerfully focused on the word. Ezra brings the book of the law of Moses. Likely this is the portion of the Torah, or Pentateuch, that focuses on the laws that give guidance to the people on how to live as God's covenant community.

Returning from a many-year exile, the people have been in turmoil. They've struggled to make sense of what happened to them. They're returned to their land, but they're still under the control of another major power. Their time away has caused them to lose sight of who they are and to whom they belong. There is dissension and strife among them.

The law, far from being a set of rules that tells them what they can't do, helps them to live together, helps them to live the life God calls them to. The law creates community among them, brings them closer to one another and closer to God.

Ezra reads from the book of the Law of Moses from early morning to midday and all the people were attentive. You can bet they have missed this. Ezra opens the book and all the people stand, they answer "Amen, Amen." They lift up their hands. They bow their heads and worship the Lord.

The word calls them together, the words creates community among them, the word brings God's presence into their midst.

And finally, this special worship is transformative for them. In verse 9 we hear that they wept when they heard the word of the law. Why? We don't really know. Maybe because they are reminded of all the ways they have fallen short of God's expectations for them, maybe from regret for all they have missed. Maybe in joy for the promise of the moment.

Ezra tells them, though, do not weep, *this day* is holy to our Lord. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

This day is holy to our Lord. This moment, this time. Take off your shoes because this place is holy ground, the Lord is present and the joy of the Lord is your strength.

The Lord’s presence, the joy of the Lord’s strength gave the people the hope they sought and they went away in great rejoicing, for they had understood the words that were declared to them.

A powerful experience of communal worship, bringing God’s covenant people together at a key time in their history. And there, on that day, in that moment, they met God and they were transformed.

Then we hear another story of a worship experience. In many ways similar, in other ways, strikingly different.

Once more a community is gathered. Gathered in the usual way, on the Sabbath, at the synagogue. And Jesus is there too—Luke tells us—as was his custom.

And in this gathered community the word is read. And Jesus is the one who reads it. As was typical, Jesus, as rabbi, stands up to read from the scroll of the Torah and he reads these words from the prophet Isaiah:

“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."

Then, again as was customary, Jesus sits to teach and his teaching is one dramatic sentence:

"Today... today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

*"**Today**, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

The community was gathered, the word was read and there before them God's promise was kept. There before them was God, in the flesh. The transformative power of the word sat there before them, in living breathing humanity.

Luke's emphasis on the word today is not accidental, it's not unintentional. We've heard it before in the gospel and we will hear it again.

The announcement from the angel, "...to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

To Zacchaeus, "When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

And again to Zacchaeus, "Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham."

And finally, to the thief on the cross, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

For Luke, the day that the promised fulfillment comes is today. For Luke, the day that God enters humankind is today. For Luke, the day that the promise meets us and makes salvation real for us is today.

This was a radical and surprising word for that gathered community in Nazareth over 2,000 years ago. But that radical and surprising word that met the worshipping community is the same word that meets us here today.

Jesus Christ is here as a real and concrete presence for us today. Make no mistake about it. Where two or three are gathered... Where the word is proclaimed... Where the sacraments are rightly practiced. Jesus is here, today, with us.

All too often it seems we dwell in the past or live for the future. And I think that's a problem of privilege. Privilege for those of us who live in safety and security. We don't have to worry about the needs of today because they are taken care of. We have food, we have shelter, we have what we need. So we can lose our sense of the moment and worry about things in the past that can't be changed. Or we lose our sense of the moment looking forward to things in the future, all the while missing the gift that is right here in front of us.

I think we can sit right here in worship and dwell on the past, or look to the future. We think about the week just past, about conversations and disagreements at work, about issues in our family, about things we wished we'd said, or not said. About things we'd gotten done, or more likely, not gotten done. Or we let our thoughts wander to after church and where we'll go to breakfast. Maybe a nice brunch at Granite City for instance. Or plans for the afternoon, or maybe the vacation that tempts us just a few weeks in the future. All too often our minds are anywhere but here.

But I'm telling you, as much as I am telling myself, don't dwell on yesterday, and don't look toward the future. Be here, be present, because "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today God is with us in Jesus Christ.

Today Jesus is present among us.

Today God's promise is kept.

Right here, right now, for us, today.

It's an extraordinary thing, amazing even. And not something to be taken lightly, not something to be taken for granted and certainly not something to be ignored...

Annie Dillard says in her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

“Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

Jesus is here. God's promise has been fulfilled. Put your crash helmet on and believe it, throw on your life preserver and know that your life has been saved. Light a signal flare and tell the world this extraordinary good news. Jesus is here. Jesus is with us. God's promise is kept.

Thanks be to God.