

“Today This Scripture Has Been Fulfilled...”

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21

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This is a sermon about two sermons. Two very important sermons, although one of them is probably more familiar to you than the other. One of them was given about two thousand years ago in the village of Nazareth; the other was given nearly five hundred years before that, in the city of Jerusalem. Both marked pivotal, watershed moments in the history of the people of God; both continue to provide guidance for our living as faithful Christians today. Let’s start with the less familiar one first.

There was a man who lived about 500 years before Jesus whose name was Ezra. He was Jewish; he was a scribe; he was a priest. He had probably been born in the city of Babylon, in what is now the country of Iraq. He had been born and raised during the period of the Exile, that 70-year span following the fall of Jerusalem. The Babylonians had destroyed the city and forcibly relocated many of the Jews to Babylon and other cities of the Empire. In those dark days, faithful Jews tried to preserve their religious customs and rituals as best they could. They were extremely successful in that endeavor; Judaism managed to grow and thrive in that environment, despite the fact that the temple in Jerusalem lay in ruins. Some Jewish boys became scribes, diligently copying and preserving that books that told of their history, their laws, and their God. Ezra was one of those scribes. Some Jewish men who were descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses, continued to serve as priests, even though they had no temple in which they could perform the traditional sacrifices and other ritual offerings to God. Ezra was one of those priests. It is not entirely clear what priests like Ezra did with their time during the days of their Exile. They were probably religious leaders for the Jewish people, and tried to preserve Jewish traditions and customs as best they could – in a way, not unlike what many pastors had to do through the first year of the pandemic, when most everyone was worshipping at home instead of at church.

The exile, thankfully, did not last forever. The Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians, who were kinder to the Jews; Persian rulers allowed many Jews to return home. They did not go all at once, and many of them never went, but over a period of time there were several “waves” of Jewish exiles who returned to Jerusalem and the surrounding areas, determined to rebuild the ancient city and their ancestral homes. So the city of Jerusalem was restored, its walls rebuilt, and its temple reconstructed.

Ezra was one of those exiles who went to Jerusalem. He went with a purpose, a specific goal in mind: to re-introduce the laws of God – the *Torah* – to the Jewish people. That was no small task. Faithful Jews believed that wanton disregard of the laws of God had resulted in the fall of the Kingdom of Judah and the exile in Babylon. It was God’s punishment on a wayward people. To Ezra and others like him, it was *imperative* that the people learn God’s law – lest something like that happen again.

Not long after Ezra and a large group of Jews arrived in Jerusalem, there came a day of rejoicing: *Rosh Hashanah*, the Jewish New Year, which is celebrated on the first day of the seventh month in the Hebrew calendar, and which is inaugurated by the blowing of trumpets made of rams' horns. All the people gathered together in an open square, near one of the gates of the city. Ezra was summoned, and told to bring "the book of the law of Moses." This was an early copy of the *Torah*, the Pentateuch, the five books that have traditionally been attributed to Moses, namely, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, which are now the first five books in both the Jewish and Christian scriptures. In Jewish tradition, those five books stand head-and-shoulders above the other scriptures, and to this day Jews hear a reading from the Torah in their synagogues every Sabbath day. But at that point in time, those scriptures were unfamiliar to many of the Jews living in Jerusalem. A platform was constructed for Ezra to stand on, in front of and above all the people. You could consider that the very first known pulpit. Indeed, the word "pulpit" comes the Latin word for "platform." Ezra stood on the platform and read ... and he read ... and he read some more. He read from early in the morning until the middle of the day. All the people stood while he read. That custom persists in many Jewish synagogues today; we Christians have our own version of it, as in many churches – including the one I grew up in – the congregation stands during the reading of the Gospel. Next to Ezra stood about a dozen other priests. Ezra read from the Torah, then the other priests "helped the people to understand the law." We think that means, first, that Ezra read the text in Hebrew, then the other priests translated it into Aramaic, the language of the common people; and second, that Ezra read the *words*, while the other priests *explained* what the words meant. "They read from the book, from the law of God, with *interpretation*. They gave the *sense*, so that the people *understood* the reading." We all know that the scriptures can be very difficult to understand. They need *interpretation*. They need to be *explained*.

This is one of the most important moments in the Old Testament, although it is not very well known. This is the first time there is a *reading from scripture* accompanied by an *interpretation* or *explanation*. It's the first scripture-based *sermon*. Of course, there had been times when assembled groups of Jews had heard speeches about God, but this is the first recorded instance of the scriptures being read from a *book*, and then *interpreted*. What Ezra did on that Rosh Hashanah some five hundred years before Jesus *set the whole course* for all future reading and interpretation of scripture, in Judaism, in Christianity, and also in Islam – all three religions of the book that trace their roots back to Abraham. Scripture is *read* to the assembled people, and then it is *interpreted*; someone *explains* it. That typically happens every Friday for Muslims, every Saturday for Jews, and every Sunday for Christians. In all three cases, the goal is to help people *understand* the scripture. That's a sermon. And it all started with Ezra.

Fast forward some five hundred years. By that point there were synagogues across the Roman world, in every city and town that had a community of Jews. Synagogues were – and remain today – places for Jews to gather together to pray, sing, listen to scripture, and hear it interpreted. Jesus, early in his ministry, was making the rounds of various synagogues. After a little while he comes to Nazareth, his hometown. This is where he grew up; this is where he came of age. He *knows* people here. People know *him*. So when he shows up at the synagogue on the Sabbath day, he is a very familiar face.

But he is not the same Jesus they had previously known. He has been anointed by the Holy Spirit of God. Probably none of the people in Nazareth had seen that happen, but all of them know that something has *changed* about his life. They have heard the rumors ... Jesus teaching in other synagogues and attracting large crowds ... Jesus healing people of their diseases ... Jesus spending forty days, alone, in the wilderness ... and before that, Jesus going to the Jordan River where that strange man

named John was baptizing. This was the *same* Jesus they had known from childhood ... or ... was he?

Jesus stands up to read from the scriptures. Was he invited to do so? Was he the appointed liturgist for the day? Some of these details are not clear. All we know is that the attendant handed Jesus the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus unrolls it and opens it to Isaiah 61. Was that the appointed reading from the prophets for that day? Or did Jesus choose that passage himself? We don't know.

Jesus reads. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," he says. Now in the book of Isaiah, the prophet is talking about *himself*, about *Isaiah*. The Spirit of the Lord is upon *Isaiah*. That is how that passage had always been understood. "Because," the passage continues, "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." Those were *Isaiah's* words. Isaiah had been speaking in a very specific historic context, to Jews who lived and died hundreds of years before Jesus. But when Jesus reads this passage ... well, when Jesus reads this passage ... its meaning *changes*.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon *me*," he says. "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." The words are the same. They haven't changed. But the *meaning* of this passage, its *interpretation*, has changed *dramatically*. The passage is no longer about what Isaiah had done. It is now about what *Jesus is doing*. *Jesus* is the one with the Holy Spirit. What had once been a passage about the distant past is now a passage about the *present*.

Jesus is telling the members of his hometown – his friends, his neighbors, his former teachers, the townsfolk he used to have dealings with – that he has a new mission in life. A new *purpose*. He is now *God's agent of salvation* in the world. *He* is now the one who will bring good news to the poor. *He* is now the one who will offer release to the captives and sight to the blind. *He* is now the one who will bring freedom the oppressed. *He* is now the one who will proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Jesus is outlining what his *whole ministry* is about – what he will be doing for the remainder of his time on earth. He is also giving a preview of the mission of the *church*, the community that exists in his name. For we are called to carry on the ministry of Jesus Christ: called to bring good news to the poor, called to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, called to let the oppressed go free, called to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. The church's ministry *continues* the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus reads the words. He does not offer an interpretation, an explanation, a sermon. He *is* the sermon. His whole *life* has become God's greatest sermon: the Word *made flesh*, enacting and embodying the very message he proclaims. He rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant, then takes his place in a pew. "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." Ordinarily the reader of scripture points to a truth *beyond* themselves. Jesus pointed to the Truth that *is* himself. Everybody just keeps staring at him. The whole room waits in silence for something to happen, for *someone* to say *something*. What has just happened *wasn't normal*. They all sense it. They all *feel* it. They all *know* it.

Jesus breaks the silence. "Today," he says, "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

There it is. The stark, blatant truth. *Jesus* is God's Anointed One. The Christ. For that is what "anointed" means; the Greek word "Christ" means "Anointed." Jesus is saying, "Here I am. It's me."

Jesus read from the Word of God. He read a passage about *himself*. For he *is* the Word of God.

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