

SCRIPTURE

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. 2 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. 3 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.

5 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. 6 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.

8 So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

9 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. 10 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

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

16 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, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

18 "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,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

20 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. 21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

MESSAGE: Your mission, should you choose to accept it

The bible is full of sermons, prophetic speeches and prescriptions about how worship is to take place. There are a lot of instructions, but it's fairly rare that we get a look into an actual worship service from biblical times. This week we get two such glimpses: in the reading from Nehemiah and the reading from Luke.

These snapshots of worship from long ago tell us a great deal; much more than you may think. You might be surprised at how much we can learn from just a few lines, and at how relevant that information is to us today.

Now, the descriptions of worship that we heard this morning don't have a lot of detail, and I think that is a good thing. It means we won't get sidetracked. When we start talking about worship it becomes very easy for us to disappear down rabbit holes and spend far too much time talking about minor issues that really boil down to preference, rather than Godly practice.

Today's readings give us what we need to know, and nothing more. So let's get into it.

The first reading, from Nehemiah, describes a worship service that took place around 430 BC, give or take a few years. The Israelites had just returned from two generations of exile in Babylon. They had rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and were beginning to re-establish themselves as God's people, once again in God's land.

After seventy years of exile, there would be very few in that worship who had ever been in Judah before. They had grown up in a foreign land, living by foreign laws and customs, speaking a foreign tongue. Of course, to them it didn't seem foreign, and that's the curious situation that they found themselves in.

Picture an immigrant family settling into Norfolk. Let's say they're from Denmark. They have kids, and though they may speak a little Danish at home and eat kringle and fried herrings, they will go to an English speaking school and eat at McDonald's with their friends. By the time those kids grow up and have kids of their own there will be very little left of their Danish heritage but a name.

Now imagine gathering up those grand children and transporting them back to Denmark and expecting them to be Danes. They wouldn't have a clue what to do. This is the position that the Israelites found themselves in. They had tried to hold onto their culture while they were in exile, but seventy years is a long time and much gets forgotten along the way.

So, they held a large public worship. They gathered in a public square, built a platform for a speaker, and that speaker read aloud to them the books of Moses, the Pentateuch, the first five books of the bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

These books contain the origin stories of humankind – of the creation and the fall, the various peoples and tribes and how they came about. These books also contain the stories of God stepping into creation and calling specific individuals and tribes, marking them, guiding them, giving them a land, a calling – an identity.

This worship service was all about identity – re-teaching the Jewish people who they were by re-teaching them who God is. Their identity is bound up in God's identity, as is ours. They needed reminding of this, they needed their story told to them again, so that they would know who they were and how to live.

In this ancient worship, we find that the Word of God was the main event. Reading the written word was the central focus of their worship – it was the main thing they did. In response to the word the people lifted their hands and said amen, they bowed their heads and worshipped, they wept, they were blessed, and they had a feast - but the most important and the most substantial component of the worship was reading aloud the Word of God, and that word bestowed an identity upon the people. It told them who they were.

One other thing I noticed about this worship service is that it was accessible – accessible physically and accessible mentally. In the temple there were some areas where gentiles couldn't go, and some areas where women couldn't go. This worship took place in a public square where everyone could attend, women, men, children, locals and foreigners, clean and unclean.

And, they read from the book with interpretation. This would have been to accommodate those who weren't familiar with their mother tongue, but also to help those who might be hearing some difficult theological ideas for the first time.

They took care to ensure that the physical space and the way they presented the word included as many people as possible. File that away for later – it's important – but the main point that I'd like to make about the worship service Ezra led is that it provided an identity for the people by focusing on the word of God.

Now we move forward about four hundred years to a different worship service. This one took place in a synagogue in Nazareth. As in the first worship we looked at, the word of God also figured prominently; in this case the living word of God was reading the written word of God.

In the first worship service the word of God conferred identity upon a people. In the second, the word of God functioned as a mission statement.

Jesus read 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,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

These are all action words – anoint, bring good news, proclaim release, give sight, set free. Jesus used the words of God to tell everyone what he was about and what he was about to do. And this wasn't just an idle one time declaration.

We read of a time when followers of John the Baptizer came to Jesus to ask if he was the one they were waiting for, the Messiah, to which Jesus replied 'Look around: the blind see, the lame walk, the dead are raised and the good news is proclaimed. How am I doing against what I said I'd do?'

Jesus had a mission statement. How very modern of him. Actually, both worship experiences are weirdly anachronistic. Those ancient people who were supposed to be an oppressive patriarchal tribal society were actually concerned about inclusivity and making sure that all genders, ages, nationalities and languages be accommodated during worship. And then Jesus with his mission statement. Now he likely didn't call it a mission statement, but that is what it was.

So this morning's readings tell us that in worship we focus on the word of God, and that in so doing we can find an identity, and a mission. The returning Jews did it. Jesus did it. We can do it as well.

And so a group of us have done just that. For the past year and a half a number of people in the congregation have spent many mornings, afternoons, and evenings wrestling in scripture, in prayer, and in discussion to discern vision, mission, and values statements for St Paul's.

Some of you may wonder if churches need such a thing – visions statements. It sounds like something from the business world – it's a cultural thing, not a spiritual thing.

I would say that these statements are necessary as they give us focus; they clarify who we are, what we do, and what we value. We may think that we already know these things, but without being reminded, it's easy to lose track. The church has a long history of making statements about identity, mission, and values. We call them creeds, or declarations of faith, and we say one every time we get together to worship.

So, let's get into St Paul's statements.

Jesus' final words recorded in Acts, just before he was taken up into heaven were 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'

St Paul's new vision statement, our identity statement, is that we are a witness in Norfolk to the transforming love of Jesus.

St. Paul's is a witness in Norfolk to the transforming love of Jesus.

It's a simple little sentence – a lot packed in there though. I'd like to dig a little.

Witness. A witness is someone who has seen something. Who has had an experience. A witness can be called upon to report what they have seen, but not always. A witness's job primarily is to observe.

And that is what we do. We stand here looking for God in whatever circumstance. We see God in expressions of love, like these roses. We see God in the faces of the people who come to our doors. We see God in the way our community surrounds each other in prayer when we are sick. We see God at work and we take note. We remember. And when the time is right, we recount those ways in which we saw God. We are witnesses.

We are witnesses in Norfolk. We grow where we are planted. Some of our mission work helps people in Toronto, Winnipeg, Guatemala, and around the world, but our primary focus is on the community that God has brought us to. We are witnesses in Norfolk.

We are witnesses to transformation. Each of us are transformed people. Each of us have been forgiven, released from past failure, affirmed as beloved children of God. Each of us have been set on a new course and given a new life. Some are more aware of this than others, but it is true of all of us. Becoming an effective witness will involve some self-reflection – taking the time to take stock of our own lives.

We are also witnesses to transformation in others. Sometimes it's easier to see that transformation in someone else than in ourselves. We have seen others set free, healed, comforted. We have seen them grow beyond their hurts and scars into something stronger, more beautiful – more alive.

That transformation, in ourselves and in others, is the result of love. Love encourages, empowers – never overpowers. Love is the gentle, yet irresistible, force that shatters hearts of stone and gives new life.

They will know you are my disciples by your love for one another, said Jesus. We witness to love, the mark of Christ.

And we are witnesses to Jesus. Without Jesus the rest of it doesn't really matter. We love because he loved us first. We are transformed, because Jesus set the transforming Spirit loose in the world, we are witnesses, because that's what Jesus told us to be.

The people of St. Paul's are witnesses in Norfolk to the transforming love of Jesus. You're going to start hearing a lot about this. This statement is going to start popping up everywhere – I'll even make t-shirts if you want.

For the next while I will be challenging you all to live into this statement. To stand at the busy crossroads of life and take time to observe – to witness the transforming love of Jesus at work in Norfolk. Because it is everywhere, if we only take the time to look.

And then we report what we have seen. We testify to the transforming love of Jesus in our words and conversations, but also in what we do. Our actions are our testimony, often more so than our words.

All through the ages God's people have needed to be reminded of who they are. The kingdom of the world always seeks to take us out of the kingdom of God. Always.

For the next while, let this statement brought to you by the visioning committee through session by that reminder. Of who you are. And why you are here.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.