

Third Sunday after Epiphany
Year C

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

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

How are we to worship? Does our worship today resemble the worship of our spiritual ancestors? The readings today give us glimpses of the worship in centuries long past that we might use as a measuring stick for worship today.

The story in Nehemiah recounts the reestablishment of worship in Jerusalem. Nehemiah and Ezra were commissioned by the Assyrian king to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and its Temple. This passage begins after the hard work of reconstruction is mostly completed and the people are gathered together to celebrate.

The first words of this passage are important - "all the people gathered." Further, we read that this includes men, women, and children. The place of this gathering is also important - in the square before the Water Gate - an area that anyone could enter, whether they were ritually clean or not. They gathered to hear Ezra, the priest and scribe, read the Law of Moses to them. But, beyond merely hearing these words, the people had Levites moving around in their midst explaining what they were hearing, especially for those who could not understand Hebrew. This is important as the Israelites had been in exile from Jerusalem for seventy years and it is likely that the younger generation grew up speaking the language of the Assyrians.

All the people stood up and Ezra began by blessing them. As he began, they lifted up their hands in praise to God and then bowed their heads with their faces to the ground. People were so moved that tears came to their eyes. Were these tears of joy or sorrow, we do not know, but Nehemiah told the people not to mourn or weep for this was a holy day. They were to rejoice, go home and "eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared."

I would compare these actions to our worship each Sunday. We invite all to join us, whether they are long time members or people off the street. Just as in the plaza before the Water Gate, all are welcome here. Then, we stand and sing praises to God in our hymns. When the Gospel is read, all stand in reverence to listen to the Word of God. And, like that day centuries ago, we have an interpretation of the reading, this time we call the sermon. After this time of instruction, we share a meal - the food God prepared for us. But, it is not just for those present, but also for those who cannot be present with us. We send out a portion to those who are at home, so no one is excluded from God's feast.

In the reading from Luke's Gospel, we see a similar style of worship. While it is not included in this passage, we know from other sources that there would be some singing of the psalms and some prayers before the reading of Scripture. When the time came, Jesus stood up to read and the attendant brought Him the appropriate scroll. After reading, Jesus explained what He had just

read - the sermon. The people obviously understood what Jesus was saying because they reacted. He laid out His mission to the people in the town where He grew up, and they didn't like what they heard.

When we hear the Word of God and listen to the instruction which follows, we also might react, though not as violently perhaps. To really hear what God is saying to us today will cause us to react, especially when we are called to change. Both Ezra and Jesus are calling for change. The Israelites needed to renew their commitment to God as laid out in Torah. Jesus, reading from the prophet Isaiah, was calling the people of Nazareth to be open to a new form of interaction with God.

While the sermons we hear today might not be that life-changing, it is hoped that we might be challenged to examine our relationships with God each week. Are we drawn to tears by what we hear? Are we enraged? We are emotional creatures and our interactions with God should evoke some level of an emotional response. Perhaps it is the singing that stirs us. Perhaps it is the readings. It could even be in the breaking of the bread - the Eucharist. Somewhere in our time together, my prayer is always that you engage with God at the core of your being. Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.