

Third Sunday after the Epiphany  
January 24, 2010  
Year C

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

He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are in the Bible many stories about the reading of words to congregations. These encounters with the word of God are occasions for invitation, challenge, and call.

After forty sleepless nights and exasperating days of drafting, editing, re-writing, and cutting, Moses stumbles down the mountain to the Children of Israel. "Here it is," he says. "Ten words written down: One God. No idols. Honor God's Name. Keep Sabbath. Honor parents. No Killing. No faithlessness. No stealing. No lying. No coveting." And the people were invited to enter into a covenant with God. The words read invited them to be a holy people, and they said yes.

Centuries later in the time of King Josiah, about 600 years before the birth of Christ, the young king is having the Temple repaired after years of neglect. The workmen are knocking down a partition. In the dust and plaster and stone they find a scroll. And they bring it to the foreman. The foreman takes it to the High Priest. The High priest nearly faints, for it is the Book of the Law. Legends about this Law had been passed down in the lore, but no one had seen the real thing in many generations. The King's Secretary hears about it and brings the book to the king and reads it to the king. King Josiah suddenly realizes that the kingdom had not been living up to the high ideals of their charter. So he gathers all the elders had read

to them “the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord.” And King Josiah made a covenant to “walk after the LORD and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book; and all the people joined in the covenant.”

Two hundred years later, after the return from the exile, the Priest and Scribe Ezra reads the words from the book of the law to the people gathered in front of the water Gate. The ancient words on their page once again leapt out and touched the hearts of the people. “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.” (Maybe our Gospel procession is not so strange after all.)

The words of scripture are ancient words. They have sat on their pages for centuries and millennia. Much time has flowed over them. Yet because they are the word of God, they have an uncomfortable ability to suddenly jump off their pages where they should decently remain, and start interfering with the present. They suddenly create a time for decision. That Sabbath day in Nazareth an ancient text suddenly blew up in the faces of the startled worshipers.

Some five or six centuries before Jesus was born, there was a Hebrew seer and writer. He used the name Isaiah, the great prophet of a hundred and fifty years earlier. During the Exile, he wrote down words of hope. He took his pen and the parchment and marked each stroke with care. He wrote of the figure of the Servant, a representation of the ideal nation of Israel, or of a person who would represent and lead Israel, the Servant of God. The writer put these words in the mouth of that servant: “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." When the ink had dried he rolled up the parchment. Others then read the words, and because of the comfort they gave, other scribes copied the marks onto other parchments, stroke by stroke, letter by letter, syllable by syllable. Then they rolled up their parchments. Moons and suns came and went, spring summer, fall, and winter. The earth turned, and those words waited on their pages. Years turned into decades, decades into centuries. The words were read and heard and copied.

Today, in a small town in the backward area known as Galilee, one of these scrolls is unrolled. The visiting preacher reads the words again. He rolls up the scroll. He hands it back to the attendant. He sits down. The people wait. A fly comes in through the window and buzzes around. The people wait. Someone coughs. Someone else shifts on the bench. This man has been getting a reputation. He can heal the sick, they say. He confronts the powers of evil. But now the words are back in their accustomed darkness, comfortable on their page, rolled up in the scroll, stored in the cabinet. Safe. The words are waiting too.

*Today. Today, here, in this place, in your hearing, today. This writing is fulfilled.* All of a sudden the words are not safe at all. They have been set free. They have leapt off their page and are suddenly banging around in our lives. The words are there confronting us. They invite us, challenge us, call us. The ancient promise is being fulfilled now. The waiting is over.

We Christians believe that Jesus is still alive. We believe that he is actively involved in our lives. Yet we go through our days with each pretty much like the last. But every now and again the Word, the word on the page or the Word made flesh, or the word of the Spirit,

some word calls out to us. The Word says, “Now, today, this minute, now is the time, now is the time, now is the time for this word to be true. Are we ready? Are we prepared for the word to leap off the page? Are we ready for the Word to become flesh? Are we ready to respond to the words of the Book? For the day will come when the words stop being ink on a page of paper.

Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”