

***Before the first reading....***

In the year 597 BC, the Babylonian conquerors began to deport the leaders and the elite of Israel to distant Babylon. In the year 586 BC in the wake of a failed revolt, the city of Jerusalem with its Holy Temple were razed and most of the rest of the people were deported to Babylon as well... to a land that would be their home for the next 49 years.

In 538 BC, the Assyrians – under the rule of Cyrus – conquered Babylon. In 537 BC, Cyrus permitted the Israelites to return home to the land of their ancestors. An estimated 40,000 – including many who had been born in exile and who had never seen this land for themselves – returned “home.”

They did not return to the cheers of welcoming crowds, but to a city that lay in ruin. It was time to rebuild... their homes, their Temple, their lives, and their faith. In the clearing of the rubble that had once been the Temple, lost scrolls of the Torah were found... the written Word of the Lord which – for whatever reason – it seems they did not have with them in their years of exile.

All that many of them knew of the Law and the Lord’s teachings had only come to them by the word of mouth of those who remembered the stories and the law. Now they had it first hand for themselves. As they gathered in the city, Ezra the priest prepared to share God’s Word with them... for the “first time”... again!

Hear now these words from the Book of Nehemiah:

***A Reading of Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-11.....***

Upon hearing the Word and the proclamation of the priests, the people found their faith, their hope and their joy renewed... as what they heard had opened their hearts and minds to know and experience for themselves the grace, love and forgiveness that the Lord now offered them. What they longed for was now their’s to receive.... as it is in every generation. Which leads me to ask: What do we long for..., and are we ready to receive it?

Five centuries later, the people of Israel would find themselves conquered again; however, this time they were not exiled as their conquerors – the Romans – simply moved in with them. Yet once again another arose to share the Word of the Lord with those who would listen as he read from the words of the prophet Isaiah..., and then sat to speak a one-sentence interpretation of what he just read.

In doing so, he offered yet another generation the opportunity to respond to God’s Word for themselves..., and as we hear this account from the gospel of Luke, we too are provided the same opportunity.

Hear not the Word of God as we find it the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Saint Luke...

***A Reading of Luke 4:14-21.....***

George Burns once said: *“The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and to have the two as close together as possible.”*

Jesus did this in one sentence. He did not offer a lengthy monologue...nor any apology... nor any argument or justification for what he had proclaimed. He simply offered himself.

Was he the one they had come to expect? Probably not.

But then again, that was neither his problem nor his concern. For he had nothing to prove to anyone.

Either they accepted him at his word...

or they didn't. The only thing that was important to him was that he knew “who” he was..., he knew “whose” he was..., and he knew the calling that was before him.

He was *“to bring good news to the poor.*

*...release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, [and] proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”*

He did not come to win the public's approval... nor to make everyone happy and comfortable. He came to say what needed to be said, to do what needed to be done, and to reveal unto all with eyes to see God's love and compassion for all people... and especially for the least, the lost and the forgotten.

He came *“to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...”* the year of Jubilee... that which came only once every 50 years... for it was to be a year when all land was to be returned to its original owners (who were often the poor who had to sell what they had)... and the year in which all slaves were set free to begin a new life.

Jesus could not be the messiah they had hoped for... the one who would do what they so desired. He could only be himself...; but that is who they really needed. For they, like ourselves, need to remember that he came to make a difference in the lives of others... rather than seek to have others make a difference in his life. Then if that be true, then we – as his voice and his hands and his feet today – need to offer others nonetheless in their journey through this life!

Sometimes today it still seems like we are waiting for another to come along to do what needs to be done... to do what we ought to be doing. Even now you are probably thinking you hope my ending is better than my beginning... and that I'll get there sooner than later. Then if that be true, then I hope it is because you cannot wait to leave here to go out into the world to make a real difference in the lives of as many people as you can.

Like the people who stood before Ezra, we need to get back into the scriptures to fully understand the Word the Lord would have us hear. And like Jesus, we need to live out that Word... not only for our sake..., but for the sake of all that we encounter day after day.

Presently we have Bible Study on Sunday evenings and Wednesday mornings..., and all of you are welcome to attend one or the other or both. Then beginning late tomorrow afternoon you have the unique opportunity of welcoming and serving some of the homeless who are seeking not only food and shelter, but the same compassion and acceptance that we all desire in life.

Yet I hope, as with Jesus that day in Nazareth, this is but the beginning of many more opportunities for us to share the love of Christ with others!