

Over 500 years before Jesus was born, the Hebrew people were conquered by the Babylonians. Solomon's beautiful Temple was destroyed and the walls around Jerusalem were torn down. The city was left in ruins and her people were taken into exile by their captors. All the sacrificial Temple worship that had defined the religious practice of God's chosen for generations came to an end; for those who were taken into captivity and for those who were left behind in a wasted land. It was then that God's people found another way to worship.

Forced to live in a foreign land, they gathered and worshiped God with prayer and hymns and reciting the scriptures. It was the beginning of synagogue worship. The people of God found another way to *keep the Sabbath*. By the time of Christ, it was an established way of worship, even though the Temple had been rebuilt in the midst of Jerusalem. That restoration had begun some 400 years before Jesus' day, as the exiles were sent back to their homeland *with resources* to begin the re-building their city and Temple.

It's an amazing story of a defeated people being empowered to go home and begin to restore their lives. Part of that story is found in the Book of Nehemiah, our O.T. text today, where we read of a gathering of the people there in the midst of a partially restored Jerusalem. The scribe, Ezra, stood on a raised platform so the people could see him and hear him as he read from *book of the law of Moses*. As Ezra read the words of the ancient Hebrew text *in Hebrew*, there were interpreters standing beside him, who repeated

what he read in Aramaic, the spoken language of the people who were listening.

By Jesus' time, the Jerusalem Temple had been rebuilt, the Second Temple, and Temple worship with all its sacrificial ritual had been fully restored. Daily ritual was attended to by a staff of priests and Levites. There were annual sacrifices and festivals at the Temple that were a required part of every Jewish male's covenanted worship of God. But the weekly-keeping of the Sabbath happened in the towns and villages where people lived, in their local synagogue.

There were synagogues scattered throughout the territories and provinces under the rule of the Roman Empire. After his baptism in the Jordan River, Luke tells us that Jesus traveled around the Territory of Galilee, *teaching in the synagogues*, and was well received by the people. Here in our text today, we read he was in his home town of Nazareth, going to "church" on the Sabbath, and being recognized as one who could read the ancient Hebrew script their Scriptures were written in, he was handed one of the scrolls written by the Prophet Isaiah. Jesus found the passage he wanted to read and after he read it, he sat down as was the custom of the day. He then interpreted the text, made the Hebrew words understandable in Aramaic, in the spoken language of his day. And then he began to offer his own thoughts about what he had read.

The *rest of that story* is our text for next week. For now, the text we read, and the bit from Nehemiah are ours to consider. 500 years ago in our worship history, those texts would have been read

in Latin. In the Western Church, the Roman Church, no matter where you lived or what language you spoke, all Scripture in a Christian worship service was written in and read in Latin. Then it would be interpreted, put into the language of the people gathered to worship. It was a page right out of Jesus' day, where the Hebrew text in the synagogues was translated into Aramaic.

Today, as one of the outcomes of the Protestant Reformation that swept across Europe 500 years ago, our Bible is written in the language we know and daily use. You and I can read it for ourselves. We can open the text in Isaiah that Jesus read all those centuries ago in a Nazareth synagogue, and read it ourselves. [Isaiah 61:1–2] We don't need someone to interpret--make that language change. Yet there is still a process of interpretation that is part of our worship ritual; the process of understanding the text as it speaks to our particular lives and what we are experiencing.

Part of that process of understanding is the sermon. Each sermon is rooted in the texts we read on our Sabbath day. That's where it begins and grows from there as it seeks to bring meaning to us, that "us" who will be gathered in worship on Sunday; always the "us" who come from a myriad of experiences; always the "us" who have experienced the week that was in a myriad of ways; always the "us" who have a myriad of expectations related to our relationship with God, a myriad of ways we relate to God. And one more thing: it's always the "us" as each one of us is, along with the "us" that we all are gathered *as God's people in this family of faith.*

Every Sunday's understanding of Scripture is there waiting to percolate through our individual lives and through our life together as the Body of Christ. If it's the sermon's job to pour the water into the coffee pot and add the freshly ground coffee beans, then it's the Spirit who stirs that machine to life, causes the aroma of freshly brewed coffee to fill the air and sends the hot brew dripping into that anticipated, delicious, awakening first cup of the day!

We are a people of The Book, the Bible, God's Living Word that centers our worship life, here in this sanctuary; that "stands" in the center of every worship service that gathers us. We call our Scriptures God's Living Word, because of the way we experience these sacred words in our lives. These words move us, inspire us, inform our way, they guide us, comfort us, bring us hope; they hear our cries, hold our tears; they stand in the breach and protect us when our world collapses in on us; they stand there for however long it takes, ready to pick us up and give us strength to go on.

The Spirit, that living Presence of Christ within and among us, percolates the words of Scripture through our lives, through our experiences. It is through the Spirit that we find these words connecting with us. On any given Sunday, the same Scripture-driven sermon is carried into our hearts and *heard* in any number of ways among us as the Spirit makes that connection within each one of us. Across the breadth of a year's worship, the Spirit nourishes every part of the life we keep together as a congregation.

We've plowed our way through a lot of history here this morning to get to this point, but then, you've always got to have

come from somewhere when you are setting off for somewhere else. We've "come from" a worship tradition that is rooted in God's Word. That "somewhere else" in our lives, is our desire to be God's people, living faithfully together, trusting God for each and every day, giving thanks for God's steadfast love for us and call to share that love with others, wherever the Spirit leads. Thanks be to God, dear friends, for this Living Word that gathers us each week, and for the Spirit that opens hearts to *listen* and follow what they hear. *Amen!*

*"in worship together: where we've come from/where we're going"*

Luke 4:14-21 012322 Mkh