

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

January 24, 2010 – 3rd Sunday After Epiphany
145th Anniversary of First Congregational Church, SLC

Nehemiah 8:1-3

All the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

Luke 4:14-21

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Words have power. With words, we bless or curse; we console or condemn; we create or destroy; we support or tear down.

Throughout the biblical text, God employed words. In the Book of Genesis, God created by speaking a word. The text reads, “And God said, ‘Let there be light.’ And there was light.” Out of the chaos of nothingness, something came into being because of a word.

Later in Genesis, in the overwhelming black of night with the flashes of stars overhead, God spoke to Abraham and said, “I am going to create a new nation from you.” From this word, two wanderers, Abram and Sarai, unheard of before that moment in history, became a nation, the people of Israel, that was to be a witness to the power of God.

As the story of Jesus began, John the baptizing one was standing in the muddy water of the slow moving, shallow Jordan River. He looked at the crowds lining the riverbank and said, “Do not call yourselves children of Abraham as if that were enough to please God. I tell you, God could raise up a faithful nation from these river stones.” God had done it before with just a word; God could do it again.

Frankly, that is why we are here today. We have come to this place of worship to hear a word. Not to hear my words, necessarily, but to hear a creative and powerful word from God. What is it that God’s word would create in us? Remember, we are called church, the body of Christ; we are called disciples, the followers and learners of God; we are called a family of faith, people with different ideas and perspectives, brought together to work in this place.

We all have experienced the creative power of the word of God, I know. Think of the times you have arrived for service, and you are down, depressed, despondent, or lacking hope. Then, somehow, during the course of the service, the words of a hymn we sing, an anthem sung by the choir, the words of a prayer, the words of scripture, or even the words of a sermon speak to you. It is as if you were called by that word to follow a new way; it is as if from the dark chaos of your life, God created new life. In those moments, we experience something of the creative power of God.

Both readings for today show a people hearing and responding to a word. Yet, both situations and responses are different.

The scene recounted in Nehemiah took place hundreds of years before the time of Jesus. The people had been in exile. The foreign conquerors finally allowed them to return to their homeland, but the task facing the people was overwhelming. When they finally reached Jerusalem, they saw a city that had been completely destroyed. The walls surrounding and protecting the city were knocked down. Homes were destroyed. Chaos ruled the place. More than that, the city was surrounded by enemies who wanted to kill the returning exiles and stop them from rebuilding. In the face of the challenges, the people worked feverishly to rebuild the walls of the city to provide some level of protection for themselves.

Somehow, the people had been able to rebuild the walls. The selection from Nehemiah 8 read this morning depicts a community moved by both its accomplishments and its shortcomings. They celebrated the sense of safety they felt because of the walls, but they also remembered how much more remained to be rebuilt. The people gathered at one of the newly fortified entrances to the city and prepared to celebrate and to worship. According to the text, we note that it is the 7th month, during which the Day of Atonement – on which the people confess their sins before God – and the celebratory Festival of Booths, which marked the nations' sojourn in the Wilderness after the Exodus, took place.

As part of the worship, a portion of the law was read. Hearing this word from God at this moment put all of their labor on the wall's construction in the context of God's saving history with Israel. The past promises of God were heard by the people as a word for them at that moment as they looked toward a future brightened with hope.

On that day, a word from God helped to recreate and to reform the individuals standing there into a people, a community, a family bound to-

gether by a common commitment to God and to one another. That word had the power to make something that had not existed before in that way.

Luke's gospel has the story of the return of a hometown boy to preach. Those in the congregation that day had seen Jesus as a boy running through the streets and as a teenager struggling with the issues of becoming an adult. They had known his most embarrassing moments as well as his times of success.

Jesus stood that day to read a passage from the prophet Isaiah. The prophet looked toward a time when the kingdom of God would be established. God's kingdom was described as a place where there would be good news to the poor, freedom for those held captive, sight given to those who were blind, and deliverance to those oppressed. The word proclaimed by Jesus and written by Isaiah promised the creation of a new people of God, who would not be limited to the borders of Israel. Instead, the promise was that all people would realize the promises of God and be blessed by God. The world was being reclaimed for God. Jesus closed his message to the people by saying that the word from Isaiah was now fulfilled.

When a word is proclaimed, the people who hear it have to decide how to respond to it. The people in Jerusalem under the ministry of Nehemiah responded by recommitting themselves to being a community under the guidance of God. The people of Nazareth responded by deciding to reject the word and its messenger. In the verses following our reading for today, the congregation grabbed Jesus and dragged him to a cliff with the intent to throw him to his death.

And so, dear people of God, we gather as a community every Sunday to hear a word from God. How will we respond? What will be our course of action when we are confronted by a word of God? Will we reject it? Or, will we recommit ourselves to being faithful to the power of that word?

Peter Gomes has written, “The gospel is for the time that is to come. Its good news is centered in a real world that struggles with questions of suffering, evil, idolatry, hope and freedom. . . . The gospel of Christ is transformative . . . The good news is inclusive . . . Preaching the gospel is a summons to faithful existence in the face of whatever happens.”

That has been the history of First Congregational Church. From the beginning sermon in January 1865 when Norman McLeod proclaimed the gospel until this moment, the people of this congregation have committed themselves to being a faithful community in the face of whatever happens. On this day, as we celebrate 145 years of hearing and responding to the word given to us by God, we face the future with the same challenge. May we and those who come after us always be faithful in the face of whatever happens. AMEN.