

## ***Lost and Found***

Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C (BCP), January 23, 2022

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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Ezra, the priest, brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and 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. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." Nehemiah 8: 1-12

Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "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." And he 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." Luke 4:14-21

What about those names in today's first reading?

Malchijah. Hash-baddanah. And Sherebiah – a name that literally means *Jehova has scorched*.

I'm guessing that many Ascension lectors are relieved to NOT be assigned today.

These names represent only a few of the countless souls who had been summoned to Jerusalem on one particular morning more than four centuries before Christ. There in Jerusalem, 150 years before, Babylonian troops breached and then destroyed the perimeter security walls, and then also the Temple that Solomon had built and dedicated to Yaweh. It had been the heart-center of Israel's faith for 350 years. Destroyed. Then all in Jerusalem – men, women and children – were rounded up and force-marched, hundreds of miles, to Babylon. Recalling all this, the Psalmist wrote: "*By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered you, O Zion ... How shall we sing the Lord's song upon an alien soil*.'" (137:1,4) It was a catastrophic loss.

Two generations later, Babylon itself was overthrown, by Persian troops and rule. Soon after, the Persian king, Cyrus, decreed that any and all Israelites could 'go home.' None who 'returned' to Jerusalem had ever been there. It was still a heap of rubble. But they recalled how their grandparents had always become misty-eyed when they remembered the city built on a hill and the glory of the Lord there.

It took four or five generations, after their return, to rebuild the Temple and city walls. And then a Jew named Nehemiah was appointed as the Persian governor in Jerusalem. He soon partnered with a priest named Ezra to initiate the spiritual revival described in today's passage. Think of it as an evangelistic crusade, complete with a makeshift outdoor pulpit. The priest Ezra brings out into full view the scrolls with the divine Law given to Moses a thousand or more years before. For the first time in almost two centuries, the gathered community hears the Word of the Lord publically read and explained.

Memories and hearts are opened as they begin to recover what, for so many, had been lost for so long. Waves of compunction move through the crowd. But Ezra and others intervene: *"Don't weep! Today is a day for rejoicing; for that which has been lost is now recovered. God is blessing us with a new beginning."*

Some of this may help us understand why this scene from Nehemiah is appointed and read today. It complements and is in conversation with the start-up of the public ministry of Jesus, as told today's Gospel account from Luke. Jesus has also returned home – to Nazareth, in Galilee, and Jesus also opens and reads from the sacred scrolls. He chooses a text from the prophet Isaiah:

*"The [Lord 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."*

As the gospel writer sees it, Jesus is announcing his own vocation and mission, and this is how Christians have always read this story. But Isaiah had prophesied 700 years prior, and before Jesus repurposed this message, it was widely believed that Isaiah was looking only 200 years into the future, to the spiritual revival brought about by Nehemiah and Ezra. Many in the synagogue that day would have known this 'traditional' interpretation. And they may have been appreciatively listening, until the moment when Jesus lays down the gauntlet, saying: *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* As we will hear next Sunday, the response to this revised interpretation was not favorable.

Those to whom Jesus speaks have not been in exile in Babylon. Their sacred scrolls have been with them since that day long ago that Ezra re-introduced them. But as Jesus encountered and saw them, those to whom he spoke, and so many others, were not only captives to Roman power but had also become exiled from a relevant, hopeful, joyful sense of religion – of God. What God had intended for the people of God had been lost along the way. Such had been the norm for so long that they were mostly blind to it. I wonder if, how or when the same may be said of us.

Basic to both of today's appointed texts is the archetypal human experience of lost and found, or loss and recovery, themes that were bedrock for the author of the Gospel of Luke and how he knew and wrote about the mission of Jesus. The word 'lost' is used more than twice as many times in Luke as in any of the other three gospels. We recently heard about the boy Jesus, lost and found by his parents in Jerusalem. (2:41-51) Only in Luke do we find the parable of the woman and her lost and found silver coin (15 :8-10) and the lost and found prodigal son (see Lk. 15:32).

The texts from both Nehemiah and Luke remind us that *loss happens*. Loss is, in fact, unavoidable. Humans lose homelands and citizenship. We lose our loved ones, our trust, our keys, our virginity, our job

security, our sense of what's important. (That is not intended as a continuous narrative, by the way. Those are independent, speculative possibilities.) Knowing this inevitability and that we are not alone may allow us to see and name our own losses, maybe starting with those we've recently experienced by way of the pandemic, or those from long before, and our hope, or not, of ever finding or recovering what has been lost?

The Nehemiah saga in particular suggests to me that some of what we've lost can't be and won't be found or recovered in our lifetimes. Seeing and reckoning with this may tempt us to lose heart – unless our visions and experiences of God can span generations and take to heart what we call 'eternal,' what endures, what was and is and shall be. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews might urge us to join the patriarch Abraham, who “*... looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*” (Heb. 11:10)

It's also true that *some* of what we've lost in the meantime, in this world, *can* be found and recovered, and sometimes just at the moment we were ready to despair. The scroll is opened, the living word once again rings true. We find our way again. Others are feeling it too. We weep. And then we laugh and rejoice.

That would be a good place for 'Amen.' But I can't end without also asking you to also wonder if or how you may be anointed in the spirit of Ezra or Jesus. What lost, blind or captive soul or souls may be waiting for you to open the scroll and read a word of life that will awaken them, that will open their eyes, that will restore their hope, that will cause them to join you in weeping and laughing. *Amen.*