

## Ascension 2.0

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 27, 2019

The Church of the Ascension

The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond

### The Appointed Readings

*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 8:2-10*

*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.' - Luke 4:14-21*

*Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. - 1 Corinthians 12:12-27*

All of the Scripture readings appointed for today seem remarkably apt in the context of both our parish Annual meeting and the past, present and future of the Church of the Ascension.

The first reading, from Nehemiah, comes alive by knowing that the city of Jerusalem had been destroyed by Babylonian troops at about the beginning of the 6th century BC. The Temple of Solomon was leveled beyond recognition. All the children of Israel who could be rounded up were forced into exile in Babylon. Some 50-60 years later, in 539 BC, Babylon was overthrown by an ambitious Persian King. After consolidating his power, Cyrus encouraged, sponsored and directed the people of Israel to 'go home.' Nehemiah became governor of Yehud, the Persian name for Judah. Resources were given to rebuild Israel's homeland, temple and religion.

At the time of today's lesson, the rebuilding of the Temple is still only a dream. But the perimeter wall of Jerusalem has been rebuilt, providing for the security that allowed a critical mass of exiles return. The story suggests that Nehemiah was a master event organizer. He built a grandstand in a known public place. He wielded his gubernatorial power to summon all available households – those with names that, in our time, only Dr. Carol Noren can properly pronounce! Nehemiah prepares and authorizes Ezra, a priest in the lineage of Aaron, to publicly reintroduce the Law of Moses, to remind and reassure the people of their identity as God's own.

And then, as we heard, *'all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.'* They wept with compunction, with sorrow for all that had been lost. They wept in recognition of their long infidelity to Yahweh. And they also wept for joy, for the hope of recovery, for the sense that they were maybe once again in the upswing of God's favor. This time also gave rise to the beautiful and haunting first verse of Psalm 126: *"When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, then were we like those who dream."*

You and I interestingly find ourselves this morning *returning to this place of worship.* The original Ascension congregation had been migrating from site to site throughout Chicago's north side, like the Israelites in the wilderness, before settling on this promised land in 1865. That year, an original chapel was moved here from a few blocks away; it burned to the ground in the great Chicago fire of 1871. We are now gathered in the chapel that was rebuilt afterward. It was named St. Faith's. A beautiful high altar stood where the choir is this morning.

The conjunction of the scene from Nehemiah and our return to this chapel may stir up thoughts on our situation now. We are likely united in wanting to build or rebuild on Ascension's illustrious history, but what would it mean for *'the Lord to restore the fortunes of Zion'* here?

In partial answer, I was intrigued when Father Petite recently shared with me a collection of reflections by three different Anglo-Catholic thinkers – all asking what it would be like to have an Oxford Movement Version 2.0. They recall the passion for relevance that fueled the original Anglo-Catholics. They are all asking: *How can we once again make the sacramental life of the Church – that is, a living faith in and with Christ – more accessible and more compelling to more people who are broken and lost and desperately in need? What are we willing to let go of? What must we preserve at all costs, and why?*

Along these lines, we may wonder: What would Ascension Version 2.0 look like? How can we ask that question without it sounding like a death threat? What vision of Ascension 2.0 might lead to just the right balance between holding on and letting go?

This text from Nehemiah is meant to complement today's gospel passage from Luke. Jesus has begun his public ministry. And one Sabbath in the synagogue at Nazareth he reads the old, old familiar words from Isaiah. They come to life in the hearts of his listeners in a new way. *Maybe the good news of which Isaiah wrote is meant for us! Maybe the captive being released is some desperation that I have been carrying around forever. Maybe the blind eyes being opened are my own.*

In a recent social conversation with a total stranger, I mentioned a cross-country move that Brooke and I had made many years ago, a move that didn't turn out at all the way that we'd hoped. We have often considered that move to be a mistake and a failure. But the woman responded as if she was a

self-appointed prophet: *"Don't worry,"* she said, *"you still have more new places in you."* She seemed to be meaning, *"Don't worry there are still new literal places where you will go and adapt just fine."* But simultaneously she seemed to be commenting on my heart and my faith: *"...you still have more new places in you."* Imagine opening a door in your heart to an entirely new realm that you can't presently imagine. Imagine it being a realm of wonder, of expanded faith, hope or love.

You still have more new places in you. That same sense of possibility and curiosity opened up in many when Jesus spoke. And I wonder what new places we at Ascension have left in us, not places of novelty for the sake of novelty, or change driven by desperation, but new places of expansion, deeper faith, even joy.

One new place we may wish to open up for investigation may be a realm of more compassionate, trusting and forgiving relationships. In the three years I've served here at Ascension, a remarkable number of members have proudly explained that cruel relationships are kind of a parochial badge of honor. *"That's just how we are here. Get used to it."* Alongside of these remarks, others have wondered with me about all of the personal pain and suffering and anger festering underneath for so many. *"What about all of the people who choose to not join the parish because of all of the dysfunction? What about those who have left because they were savaged and no one asked for forgiveness or came to their aid?"*

It may seem as if I'm talking about *you*. And maybe that's true. But I'm also talking about *us*. A couple of months ago my wife Brooke was talking to a friend from another state. When Brooke shared an anecdote about some drama that had recently boiled over here in the parish, our friend asked:

*"How long has Patrick been there?"*

*"Three years."*

*"Uh-oh ..."* she said, *"By now he's definitely a part of the system."*

And I guess that's true. So if I've brought about damage in my relationships with any of you, I ask you to bring it to my attention for repair.

Broken relationships and those that no one seeks to repair are clearly out of line with St. Paul's teaching on the body of Christ, the heart of which is partly exposed in today's reading from 1st Corinthians. Paul's main premise is that we are all connected. None of us acts, whether hatefully or lovingly, in isolation. When we lash out at those we resent, we harm and diminish and mock the body of Christ. When we listen with patience, when we ask for forgiveness, when we weep with those who weep and laugh with those who laugh, we once again bring to life and honor the same living body of Christ that nourishes us in the sacrament. The passage we heard today ends with Paul's comment: *"If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."*

Just yesterday Jim Lo Bello brought to my attention the fact that I have not yet placed the sacrament in our temporary tabernacle up here. We talked about when we should do that, and we thought that we might want to wait until after the annual meeting that we'll be having here in this same place after the mass! This reminded me of the story about the Irish priest who returned to his church and discovered that dancing was taking place there after a wedding! When he harshly scolded the newlyweds, they seemed puzzled and asked, *"But Father, isn't it true that our Lord himself performed his first miracle at a wedding?"* *"Yes!"* roared the priest, *"But the blessed sacrament was not there!"*

In theory, in faith, the blessed sacrament, the living body of Christ, is ... everywhere – everywhere *we are*, everywhere we go, gathered for mass or a wedding *in the church*, going forth into the world, in every word or deed in which Christ is genuinely honored and revealed *in us and through us*.

Our annual meeting is largely a time to tend to the temporal affairs of the church. But it is also a time to wonder about our shared spiritual condition, past, present and future. What might 'Ascension 2.0' look like? What has been exiled in us? What can be restored, with God's help, in the body of Christ and in the ministries and witness we share? *Amen.*