

Fearless Giving in Fearful Times:

Guided by the Book

A Sermon by David Bennett

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Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21

This morning we are celebrating the third Sunday after Epiphany as we make our way through our Stewardship Campaign focused on *Fearless Giving in Fearful Times*.

The Christian Century comments about this morning's reading from Luke, "...that message in Nazareth could just as easily be preached today. It's not hard in this day and age to think what 'release to the captives' might mean. It's not too hard to think about what 'sight to the blind' might mean. Or to 'let the oppressed go free'. This radical message, first proclaimed by Isaiah in the Assyrian empire, then by Jesus in the Roman

Empire, has a particular resonance for the American empire.”

Yes, each of us can easily identify those politicians, political stances, or social ills which almost demand a sermon based on this passage from Luke be preached to the “American Empire”.

But, this morning our focus is on *Fearless Giving (and living) in Fearful Times*. And, so both the reading from Luke and from Nehemiah will guide us in pondering how we might *give fearlessly in these fearful times*.

In these moments, both speaker and hearer pray for guidance from the Holy Spirit so that God’s word – read and proclaimed touches our spirits and nurtures our journeys. God’s word is, indeed, the word of life. Our readings this morning make this clear.

Jesus has begun his ministry. He travels from up north to his hometown and as

would be the custom for any rabbi – Jesus goes to his hometown synagogue.

He is handed a scroll. He unrolls the scroll and he reads words we heard a few moments ago (words we find in Chapters 58 and 61 of Isaiah). Important and challenging words, words from Jesus' sacred scripture.

In Jesus' return to the synagogue, there doesn't seem to have been any light-hearted banter – "How goes the ministry up north?" "How's the rabbi training?" "Where in the world did you get those twelve guys?"

None of this idle chatter. Here's the scroll, read the scripture (the word of God). Jesus reads it all right. Makes his ministry very clear – a ministry supported and nurtured by scripture, by reading and living out God's word of life. God's word, and God's spirit, is at the center of Jesus ministry as he

challenges the religious and secular institutions of his day.

The centrality and importance of scripture in our faith journey is also seen in the Nehemiah reading.

The Israelites have returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian exile. Jerusalem is in ruins, needing to be rebuilt. The Israelites begin their rebuilding with the temple, the center of national prestige, a sign of stability, a symbol of God's presence.

This is where the text for today picks up. As the hammering and nailing and brick-making have been going on a copy of the Torah is discovered in an old half-destroyed wall.

The word of God, the word of life, at the center of the Jewish faith – imagine the excitement. Having lived in exile for so many years, struggling to remain true to their faith,

God's word is discovered in their midst,
uniting the Jewish community once again.

From the youngest to the oldest – they are summoned to the square outside the temple. Only the priests and Levites would have been allowed inside the temple. Here, in the square everyone can hear God's word of life. Imagine their excitement as Ezra climbs onto the platform.

The word of God is read, the word of God is interpreted. The people weep for joy at hearing the promise of God's being in their midst.

Just as the reading from the sacred text of Isaiah centered the ministry of Jesus, this word from the Torah touched the spirits of the Israelites, re-centered them in their journey, renewed their commitment to follow their God.

God's word also nourishes us for our journey, challenges us in our living, centers us for our daily living. God's word is at the heart of all we do as followers of Jesus; including the sharing of our gifts.

But it is not enough to hear God's word only on Sunday morning. It must be a part of our daily journey. The word of life for our life's journey is discovered by reading and studying God's word.

This is not easily done. Frederick Buechner helps us out in our excuse making. He says, *"There are good reasons for not reading it (the Bible). Its format is almost supernaturally forbidding: the binding rusty black like an undertaker's cutaway; the double columns of a time-table, the print of a phone book, cluttered margins... There are other reason for not reading it. It not only looks awfully dull, but some of it is. The prophets*

are wildly repetitious and almost never know when to stop. There are passages that even Moses must have nodded over...The barbarities. The often fanatical nationalism." Buechner's list continues, but I think we get the idea.

And then there is the challenge of what we have learned from biblical scholars. One intriguing book: *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* by Bart Ehrman reminds us that what is written in what we know as the Bible, may not be, in reality probably is not, what was originally written.

All these reasons to not read the word of life. And yet...Buechner, after having given his reason for not reading the Bible, writes: *"And yet – because it is a book about both the sublime and unspeakable, it is a book also about life the way it really is. It is a book*

about people who at one and the same time can be both believing and unbelieving, innocent and guilty, crusaders and crooks, full of hope and full of despair. In other words it is a book about us. And it is also a book about God. If it is not about the God we believe in, then it is about the God we do not believe in. One way or another the story we find in the Bible is our own story."

So there we have it – reasons not to read the Bible and reasons we must. Whatever we choose – to leave the Bible dust covered and on the shelf, to idly thumb through the pages, or to study the word of life in depth – the Bible is the book which guides our faith journey.

The word of God is the word of life. I invite you to prayerfully spend time with this word. Read Psalm 1, 15, 24, most of Psalm 139, or just about any Psalm. Check out

Jeremiah 6:16. Ponder the poetry of the creation stories and the ancient stories of Genesis. Read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 -7 (or the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 11). Meditate on Romans 8, especially the last 4 verses. What word of life is offered in the parables? And, there is so much more!

We might also check out some of the passages related to our *Fearless Giving in Fearful Times*. Discover the many, many times Jesus speaks about money (*Read Mark 12:41-43 or Matthew 6 as two of the places: or read Chapter 16 of Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians*).

More of Jesus' teachings are about how we are to use our money than almost any other subject. Jesus and Paul and the writers of Hebrew scripture are all very clear – how we use, how we share our wealth, is more than a financial issue, it is a spiritual issue.

When we read the scriptures, when we allow the good news of God, when we allow God's word to touch our spirits and guide our living – we joyfully give because of what God has done for us. We joyfully give because we have experienced the life of faith within this community – the community of Central United Methodist Church.

Karl Barth, that great Protestant theologian, wrote that reading the Bible is like looking out the window and seeing everyone on the street shading their eyes with their hands and gazing up into the sky toward something which hidden from us by the roof. They are pointing up. They are speaking strange words. They are very excited. Something is happening which we cannot see happening. Or something is about to happen. Something beyond our comprehension has caught them up and is seeking to lead them

on (as Barth says) “from land to land for strange, intense, uncertain, and yet mysteriously well-planned service”.

We crowd into the square with the Israelites and hear Ezra read God’s word. We are with Jesus in the synagogue as he offers God’s word of life. This word of life catches our spirits and leads us into strange and uncertain futures of service. But, these futures are guided by the word of life and nurtured by God walking with us. Our hearts touched by the love and grace of God discovered in reading God’s word, our spirits changed by God’s presence in our journey, our lives lived in faith, give us the courage to *give (and live) fearlessly in fearful times*. Let it be so!