

A Great Sermon

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, January 24, 2010)

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-12 ¹By the seventh month the people of Israel were all settled in their towns. On the first day of that month they all assembled in Jerusalem, in the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra, the priest and scholar of the Law which the LORD had given Israel through Moses, to get *the book of the Law*. ²So Ezra brought it to the place where the people had gathered—men, women, and the children who were old enough to understand. ³There in the square by the gate he read the Law to them from dawn until noon, and they all listened attentively. ⁴Ezra was standing on a wooden platform that had been built for the occasion.

⁵As Ezra stood there on the platform high above the people, they all kept their eyes fixed on him. As soon as he opened the book, they all stood up. ⁶Ezra said, “Praise the LORD, the great God!” All the people raised their arms in the air and answered, “Amen! Amen!” They knelt in worship, with their faces to the ground.

⁸They gave an oral translation of God’s Law and explained it so that the people could understand it. ⁹When the people heard what the Law required, they were so moved that they began to cry. So Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra, the priest and scholar of the Law, and the Levites who were explaining the Law told all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God, so you are not to mourn or cry. ¹⁰Now go home and have a feast. Share your food and wine with those who don’t have enough. Today is holy to our LORD, so don’t be sad. The joy that the LORD gives you will make you strong.” ¹¹The Levites went around calming the people and telling them not to be sad on such a holy day. ¹²So all the people went home and ate and drank joyfully and shared what they had with others, because they understood what had been read to them.

Luke 4:14-30 ¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When 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, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ “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, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰And 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. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” ²⁴And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷There were also many lepers[£] in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

One of my seminary classmates tells the story that on his way home from church he was talking to his wife about the sermon. He felt that his message just didn’t click that morning, and try as hard as he could, he felt like he didn’t completely get his point across. The way he put it, he said to his wife, “My sermon just didn’t seem to take off this morning.” She replied that she understood, “But,” she added, “it certainly spent enough time taxiing on the runway!” In our culture we love to tease the preacher about preaching too long. And for the most part, I go along with it. There was even a joke going around among seminary students when I was there, especially among seniors who were traveling around doing supply preaching. We said there was a new beatitude: “Blessed are they who preach briefly, for they shall be invited to return.”

But on the other hand, if you trace the history of preaching, you will probably find that when our country was founded, sermons often lasted 2-4 hours. 100 years ago the sermon was reduced to an hour. When I was in seminary, the rule of thumb was 20 minutes. And now we have cut it back to 15, or 12, or only 10 minutes in

some churches. Why has this happened? Why can't we tolerate the long sermon any more? What is wrong with us? Or more specifically, what is wrong with you, the listeners? Oh, I understand part of the problem is our culture. We don't like to spend more than an hour at anything. Unless it is a good movie, or a football game, or an evening watching television. But not in church! We have to keep things moving, we have other things to do, other places to go... Maybe that is part of our problem – we have too many things to do.

But another part of the problem is our training. We haven't taught ourselves to sit still and listen. Television has taught us the 30 second sound bite – do your advertisement, convey your message in 30 seconds or you will lose the attention of the listener. And I have heard the argument that if the preacher can't get a point across in 10 minutes, it won't happen in 20, or 60 minutes either. So can anybody tell me why we cheer when the baseball game goes into extra innings or the basketball game into overtime and we sit on the edge of our seats, excited, but only glare at our watches and fidget when worship the service isn't over by 12? Ministers have been incredibly creative in dealing with this problem. Some use films, PowerPoint presentations, overheads, drama, all with the hope of keeping the attention of their congregations.

Ezra didn't use any of that. As he stood in his pulpit, or on his platform as it is described in verse 4, he read from Scripture and interpreted scripture from dawn until noon. Then look at how the congregation responded: they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord, and they wept when they heard the word of God. It seems that he got his message across without the use of pictures. As always, we need to take a look at the background of this story. The people of Israel had been defeated by the armies of Babylon. Everyone who was anyone was taken away as a prisoner and resettled in Babylon and surrounding towns. Eventually they were permitted to move back to Jerusalem. Nehemiah was in the king's favor and was not only given permission to return to rebuild the city, but was given funds and building materials to help in the reconstruction. Ezra was the Jewish priest who accompanied him. When they were living in Babylon, they kept the memory of Israel alive through stories handed down from generation to generation. You can be sure there were stories of this being a land "flowing with milk and honey." But when they arrived, they found a city in ruins. And so they set about the task of rebuilding. The earlier chapters of Nehemiah do not indicate worship or reading from Scripture, up until this morning's lesson. So after many years of not reading Scripture or proclaiming the Word of God, an entire morning was devoted to preaching and teaching. And the people were touched to the heart. I don't know if the preaching that morning was all that great, but the audience was ready and eager to hear the word of God. In fact, I would suggest the key to powerful preaching is not the preacher, but the readiness of the audience.

In our Gospel lesson, the greatest preacher of all, our Lord Jesus, preached in the synagogue. He used as his text one of the favorite passages of the people, from their favorite book, Isaiah. And he used this as his mission statement. If you were asked to summarize the ministry of Jesus, what would you tell me? Some would mention his miracles, like walking on water, or healing the sick, raising the dead Lazarus, or even turning water into wine. But look at the verbs in verse 18: "bring good news, proclaim release and recovery, set free, and proclaim the year of the Lord." Do you see it? Three out of four verbs have to do with speaking, proclaiming, or in modern English, preaching. This was Jesus' ministry: to speak, to proclaim the word of God. Healing was just a sermon illustration. Walking on water was done to make a point. Even raising the dead was done so that the people might believe. When Jesus started his preaching, the congregation in Nazareth first responded by saying, "what a great sermon." But when Jesus tried to get them to understand how they had sinned and disappointed God, they turned on him. The sermon was only good as long as it didn't disturb their comfort.

We have in our two lessons today a profound contrast between two congregations. The people of Israel listened to Ezra, who just read Scripture and interpreted it - nothing great, just what every preacher tries to do, and the people were moved, deeply moved. The people of Nazareth came and heard the greatest preacher of all time, none other than the Son of God. And from all indications, it was a very brief sermon. But they didn't like it. It offended them and they even wanted to run him out of town. The word of God came to them and they rejected it. The problem was not the preacher – it was the audience.

I titled my sermon today, "A Great Sermon." Was it a great sermon? If you don't think so, maybe you need to ask yourself, "What is wrong with me?" Didn't you hear the word of God read? Didn't you hear the words of Jesus?

Let us pray. Dear God, open our ears. Open our hearts, that your word might enter. Touch us with your word. Bring us to our knees. Bring us to renewed faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.