

[Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Cor. 12:12-30; Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21]

Life is complicated. Most of us don't live our years in a perfectly straight line without a few twists and turns. And sometimes we choose outright departures from the original direction we were headed. Opportunities arise that we had never even considered, and we take the risk to follow them.

Or, circumstances quite out of our control throw us curveballs we weren't expecting. Lucky breaks (a promotion that involves moving to a new city) and misfortune (injury, illness, and loss) each have a way of changing the plan we had for our lives until sometimes we can no longer remember what the plan was supposed to be. In high school, I was counseled to become a bookkeeper or a librarian. Isn't THAT exciting?! I'm glad I followed God's plan for me instead!

At times, we may look back at who we were and not recognize that person anymore. Or we may stare into the mirror today and wonder who the heck *that* could possibly be! As the road takes detours we hadn't anticipated, our very identity may be called into question. Maybe you were planning on a career in finance and wound up in social work. Or in your younger days, you may have been a hippie, and now you own gobs of real estate. Perhaps you never thought you'd have so many children, or you were counting on the idea that your marriage would last a lifetime. Sometimes we have dreams we can't reach; and at other times, life blossoms into something beyond our wildest expectations.

But what do you do when you're lost and want to find your way back to the person you were or want to be? That goal, like any goal we set for ourselves, begins with a decision to act. We can't change the past. We can't seize the future. The only moment we hold in our hands is now. And it's the most powerful moment in our lives.

The dilemma of getting back on track is timeless. Imagine the scene we heard about in the First Reading. The nation of Israel has been exiled in a foreign land for so long that they barely remember the covenant of Moses anymore. When they are finally free to return to their homeland -- or at least, their children and grandchildren are -- they set about rebuilding their ruined cities.

Along with the exterior reconstruction, of course, there must be an interior recapturing of their identity as a people. Ezra the priest knows this and brings forward the Law of Moses to read before the nation. Who they are, and who they are not, is contained in the words of this scroll.

And the nation has stood in this situation before many times throughout its history, when Moses, Joshua, and later kings and religious leaders would stand before the nation and order the Law of Moses to be read aloud. At every critical juncture, the people have needed to be reminded of the promises they had made and the Lord whom they serve. They need to choose again to serve the Lord, or some other. Sometimes they have heard the words of the Lord with delight and at other times with dread in their hearts.

In the presence of Ezra that day, the people literally “lay down and cry.” They hear the direction they’ve been called to go, and they know darn well how far they’ve strayed. It seems overwhelming, impossible really, that they could ever make it back to the people they are eternally called to be. Their weeping betrays their despair, their repentance and their hope.

Ezra reminds the people that the Word of the Lord is supposed to be *good* news. He tells them to celebrate this day as a new opportunity, and not mourn it as if it were a death sentence. Ezra calls the moment of decision *holy*, because in it is the full measure of the power of God. God will be their strength. God is Lord of the impossible. The people don’t have to conform to their true identity all at once. All they need to do is take the first step and grab onto the Word of Life.

When Jesus presents the scripture to the people of his day, He is offering them an even better opportunity. *In this hour*, Jesus says; meaning that the Word becomes flesh right before our eyes! This is the same hour in which we stand right now. Today’s the day, now is the acceptable time, we have nothing else to wait for and not a moment to lose. People of faith can never stop at impossible. The power of decision is in our hands, and the strength of our God is invested in us. Now is the acceptable time; there is no better moment to act!

In the Gospel passage describing Jesus’ return to Galilee, Jesus is in a take charge, electric mood. Imagine sitting in church and an altar server walks up

to this ambo, reads from Scripture about the coming of the Messiah, and then proclaims to the congregation that “this Scripture is fulfilled this very day in me.”

Wow! Yet for most of us we’d actually be thinking: how misguided. In fact we’d probably boot the kid right out of church, and if they continued to blaspheme and claim authority that only God can rightfully claim, we’d probably have them locked away for life, which would be only a slightly better fate than Jesus actually received at the hands of His contemporaries. Don’t worry altar servers -- I would just send you back to your pew!

Today act as if you truly believe this Gospel -- that God is here among us loving us unconditionally. It’s impossible not to want to do great things out of sheer gratitude that God chose to be with us.

Back in 1985, St. Martin de Porres Parish had the distinction of being the first parish in the Archdiocese of Detroit to bring the Stephen Ministry into our parish. It is a ministry of support and encouragement for our parishioners during times of difficulty and loneliness. They will join us next week at the 11 AM Mass to renew their commission, and to ask us to re-commit ourselves to supporting them.

My friends, take time to spread the Good News today: Assure a grieving friend that they will be comforted; remind a loved one in pain that their suffering will be redeemed; muster the courage to ask someone you hurt for forgiveness. Like Jesus, speak and act with confidence that God’s promises to us will be fulfilled and that the best version of yourself is who you were meant to be.

AMEN!