

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

Back in September of 2019, our Holy Father, Pope Francis, declared the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time as a Day to celebrate, study and disseminate God's Holy Word as it comes to us in our Bible. I could tell you today my top ten favorite Bible passages, and spend hours talking about them, but I suspect you would start tuning out after ten minutes! They all focus on a message of hope.

A new bishop was visiting the parishes in his dioceses. He asked the pastor of a large church, who was a poor preacher: "What is the occupancy of this building?" Knowing that his homilies caused many to doze off, the pastor said, "This church SLEEPS 700 people!"

Hope is a beautiful virtue. Stop and consider: What do you hope for these days? A fresh new start? Lower prices and bills? Health for an ailing family member? A better job? A change of scenery? A change of heart? Freedom from fear? An Upper Sacristy water pipe that doesn't burst in the winter? It's important to know what we're hoping for, and that we're hoping for *something* and keeping that hope alive. Our hopes define our intentions, our ambitions, and our direction. Hope helps us get where we want most to go. Hope motivates us toward the future. People without hope remain mired in the present -- or worse, they are stuck in the past.

Today's reading from the Book of Nehemiah describes a somewhat odd scene. Just about the entire Israelite nation had just spent a full morning -- apparently with their faces to the ground -- listening to a recitation and interpretation of the book of God's Law.

When it's over, it seems they begin to weep, so much so that Ezra and the priests have to remind them that hearing the decrees of God was supposed to be an occasion of rejoicing, not sadness.

Perhaps it was sore knees that produced their crying, but more likely it was because those assembled realized the great challenges and responsibilities that went with being God's chosen people.

It isn't easy following the Ten Commandments and the teachings of the Church, but it does give us an identity, a purpose and a fulfillment which we could not have without God or His Church.

Ezra and the priests try to give the Israelites hope for the future, hope for living out day to day the laws given by God. It IS possible and it can be joyful!

The people of Galilee in Jesus' time had hopes too. Most of what they hoped for was pretty unlikely, yet they persisted. Just as we gather each week in church around this table of our great hope, the citizens of Nazareth gathered each week in their synagogue to read from their sacred books, to keep hope alive.

Centuries ago, Isaiah had declared God's plan of liberation for Israel. Isaiah foretold this day of freedom to the people in Babylonian exile, and within a generation or two, the exiles did go home. But not to total and unbridled freedom. It was a call to the freedom not to do whatever they WANTED. It was a call to the freedom to do what they OUGHT to be doing. The Israelites were re-called to moral and religious freedom. And they failed miserably. But God didn't give up on them or us. He still has hope in the human family. Until then...

First the Persians ruled over the Israelites. Then the Greeks. Now it was the Romans who kept the Israelites under the thumb of

foreign rule, taxed them to pieces, and tempted their young people with foreign ways of thinking and behaving.

For six centuries since the time of Isaiah, Israel was an oppressed and broken community. Still, they continued to listen to Isaiah's hopeful words about glad tidings and liberty to captives. Only people who lose hope close the book and walk away from it.

When Jesus shows up in Nazareth after His initial successes and all the buzz, His old synagogue is glad to welcome Him back. His family is there. So are His neighbors. These people know Joseph's son. They'd be glad to see what other towns have seen in him, a little pizzazz and a wonder, a sign, a miracle or two.

Jesus reads a prophecy of hope -- and then declares it officially fulfilled. In Himself! By doing this, He claims to be the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God. Very shortly, this familiar crowd of relatives and neighbors who welcome Him think that Jesus has lost His mind. They are going to try to run Jesus off a cliff, but He breaks through the crowd. What went wrong? Why did these faithful synagogue-goers let go of hope just at the moment when they had it right before their very eyes and might have grasped it?

One essential ingredient in the nature of hope is *action*. We can't just *wish* for a better scenario if we're not prepared to lean into that future with our whole will and our best efforts. When hope stands in front of us, we have to reach for it.

My friends, the Spirit of the Lord is upon YOU! St. Paul reminds us to remember the spiritual gifts and talents we have received at our Baptism, our First Communion, which we celebrate

this weekend with two members of our OCIA -- Joseph and Laura -- and at our Confirmation.

The Spirit of the Lord has anointed YOU to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, the recovery of sight to the blind of heart and mind, to help set those with addictions free, to proclaim a time acceptable to the Lord.

St. Paul lists those gifts that we have at our disposal. There are signs and works you can do that I cannot do. There are signs and wonders I can do that you cannot do. Yet all of us are the Lord's hands and feet, eyes, and ears and mouth. Some of us have a greater honor, and others less honorable.

Find out what part of Christ's body YOU are. Pray and discern how you can be an agent of hope. Look up, read, recite out loud, and pray YOUR favorite Bible passages. Share them with one another. Be hopeful and "do not be sad, for rejoicing in the Lord must be your hope and your strength!" AMEN!