

1/27/2019

“Rejoice in God’s Word”

Scripture: Luke 4:14-21; Nehemiah 8:1-10

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Theme: God’s word and good news should bring joy and strength to all who would listen and believe.

Have you ever noticed how news can have one effect on some people, and just the opposite on others? Whether it’s about religion, politics, economics, or even weather conditions, we are prone to feel or respond in different ways to what we hear.

We can be thankful and glad that the US government shutdown has been suspended, and that at least for now those government workers who have had their pay suspended for the past month should soon be receiving it. But that does not mean that the issue is resolved, or that it won’t happen again anytime soon. And, that concern and issue is just the byproduct of another. Whatever position we hold, human lives are affected.

It should come as no surprise then, that even the word of God, and even the good news of the gospel, has been received in different ways by different people at different times, even though God’s intention is the ultimate well-being of all people.

† The Word of God may often cut like a two edged sword, yet God wants us to find joy and strength through our relationship

The writer of the Book of Nehemiah in the Hebrew Bible, records in the time of the return of the people of Israel and Judah from exile in Babylon, around 480 B.C.E. or before the time of Jesus. He writes (8:1-10):

. . . all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. ² So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

. . . ⁶ Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷ The Levites . . . instructed the people in the Law

while the people were standing there. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, **“This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep.”** For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Nehemiah said, **“Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”**

The people responded to God’s word by weeping. They felt guilt and sorrow, because when they had heard and understood the high standard of the Law of God, their hearts were convicted by realizing their shortfalls and sins. But, God wanted them to rejoice because it was a holy day.

Indeed, God wants us to find joy and strength through our relationship with God, so **“Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”**

As the Nelson Study Bible (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997) says, “The joy of the Lord is the joy that springs up in our hearts because of our relationship to the Lord. It is a God-given gladness when we are in communion with God. When our goal is to know more about the Lord, the by-product is His joy.” Strength as Nehemiah refers to, means a “place of safety,” a “refuge,” or “protection.”

The people’s refuge – our refuge and strength – is the joy of our relationship with God! They had rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem to protect them from invasion by other peoples, yet it was God who was their true protector.

It is the joy of our relationship with God which gives us strength against temptation and attack by the Adversary of God upon our thoughts, feelings and actions. These are the attacks which do us greatest harm. So rejoice in God’s word, and stand strong in the joy of the Lord!

† **Jesus came to proclaim the good news of God’s favor, and the fulfillment of God’s word, justice and mercy.**

Luke tells us in his gospel account (4:14-21) NIV:

¹⁴ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Vs. 22 says . . . All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked.

It’s perhaps interesting that this story is found only in Luke’s account of the gospel. Further, the heading given to it by most translations, which is not in the original text, is “Jesus Rejected at Nazareth.” That’s because although he preached the good news of fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah from centuries earlier, he also stirs up the anger and resentment of the townspeople of Nazareth; so much so that they tried to drive him out over a cliff and stone him. He does that by telling them that just as God’s messengers and miracles went to others beyond the Israelites because they were rejected, so it will be if Jesus is rejected.

Indeed, as the gospels tell, and as we heard last Sunday, Jesus does go beyond those of his own Jewish faith and lineage. He crosses the boundaries of culture, race, and religion. He crosses the division of gender and class. He even crosses the boundaries of politics and power.

† **As followers of Jesus, our mission is to do the same.**

We are called to see all the people. To meet all the people. And to love all the people. By our baptism in Christ, the Spirit of the Lord is upon us. He has anointed us to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind. He has appointed us to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor for all people!

Whether those conditions are spiritual, mental, emotional, or physical, we are called and empowered by God to fulfill Christ’s mission.

So . . .

How do you feel on hearing or reading the word of God?

Have you experienced “the joy of the LORD” in your life?

How have you, or do you, share it with others?

Rejoice in God’s Word, and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength!