### “Release to the Captives” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Jan. 23, 2022

**Nehemiah 8:1–3, 8–9**

1All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. 2Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. 3He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. . .

8So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. 9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.

**Luke 4:14–21**

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.

16 When 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.”

Sometimes our Scriptures express some strong emotions. The Nehemiah passage shows the people having a strong reaction when the law is read to them. They are moved to tears by the reading. It may be that they are no longer very familiar with the text. It is a couple of generations after Jews started returning from the Babylonian Exile, although some of the people have just recently returned from Babylon to Jerusalem. It is a time of relative poverty and low population in Jerusalem. It is during the early times of the Second Temple, however the reading does not take place at the Temple, but at the Water Gate, possibly to support the judicial nature of the law. The city gate is where court cases were heard.

It is interesting that the reading was “with interpretation” (Neh 8:8). They were being taught a biblical theology that sought to make sense of the history of the Jewish people from Abraham’s day to subjugation in Egypt to Exodus, settlement in the land, the period of the Jewish monarchies, to the Babylonian Exile, and the return from exile.

This probably represents the beginning of the organized teaching of Bible and theology, leading to the theologies of later times. Ezra the priest takes this teaching assignment in hand. The people respond emotionally, and this experience probably plays a major role in solidifying the group’s sense of purpose and identity. They need all the help they can get. They are a weary and confused lot.

Their grandparents or great grandparents had been taken into captivity to Babylon. Some of them may have been living in Jerusalem for a generation now; others of them don’t know Jerusalem at all. Babylon is the only home some of them know.

They and their parents probably had not had much Scriptural teaching or religious leadership during the Exile, so they are fairly leaderless, ignorant, and poor at the time that Ezra begins preaching to them. Obviously, the exposure to the Bible now holds great meaning for them. We don’t know if Ezra also reads to them from the prophets, but the prophets will be part of the collection that the Jews will have centuries later, in Jesus’ time.

Nehemiah then goes on to describe the priests and Levites comforting the people and telling them not to weep. It also describes them discovering in the text the description of the holiday of Sukkoth, which they had apparently forgotten. They go and gather branches to build booths for themselves, in order to celebrate Sukkoth (8:14–17). It is really a story of the rediscovery and rebirth of Jewish ritual and tradition.

The story in Luke is not a rediscovery of the law, but it is Jesus using a prophetic teaching to give birth to a new teaching. It is the story of the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, and one of the most important passages to tell us about Jesus’ purposes. What I’ve quoted above is really half the story. We’ll look at the second half next week. Where this part ends is with him telling the congregation: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21).

So what he had just read functions as an announcement of his own mission. He uses Isaiah 61 as a programmatic statement about his ministry. He has been anointed to bring good news to the poor, to “proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (4:18–19).

The four main themes are that the speaker is anointed with the Spirit, is proclaiming good news to the poor, healing the blind, and releasing the captives. These captives could be interpreted to mean those who are captive to fear or to bad religious beliefs. The point is repeated: “to let the oppressed go free” (4:18). Those who are spiritually blind need their spiritual insight restored, and those who are oppressed and weighed down by harsh religious beliefs need to be freed.

There is a phrase from Isaiah 35:5, “the eyes of the blind shall be opened,” inserted in the passage. We don’t know if Jesus actually inserts this passage, which would be unexpected, or whether Luke has accidently inserted the passage, quoting Isaiah 61 from memory, and not getting it quite right. It does not seem likely to me that Jesus would deliberately inject that clause into a reading of Isaiah 61.

What *does* seems deliberate to me is that Jesus refrains from quoting the very next clause in Isaiah 61. In Isaiah, the speaker is proclaiming “the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God” (61:2). But vengeance is not part of Jesus’ revelation, and he stops mid-sentence before that part. He feels no obligation to quote the vengeance passage. It does not match what he came to do, and the rest of it does. What a positive message! Good news for the poor, healing for the blind, release for the captives, and freedom from oppression.

How do you think the congregation responded when they heard their local son say these words, spoken with authority? Jesus makes a bold claim when he says he is the Spirit-filled person, anointed and sent by God, who is fulfilling a recognized Scripture. There’s no way to water down the claim he’s making. He was either anointed and sent by God, or he was not and really has no business making such a claim.

I think that some of what Jesus did when he reshaped Scripture as part of his teaching, is like a greater version of what Ezra did: offered Scriptural truth to truth-hungry people, but with a new interpretation. In the Sermon on the Mount, he said “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black” (Matt 5:33–36; quoting Num 30:2).

Instead of a lesson on fulfilling oaths, it becomes a lesson about not making oaths at all, but recognizing the supremacy of God and the limited range of one’s own power. He gives principles to live by. Later in that sermon he says “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt 7:12). This is the new law, the inner and spiritual intention of the old law. Paul says “the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal 5:14).

When Jesus gives the dual love commandment, to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself (Matt 22:37–39), he finishes by saying “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (22:40). The foundation of the law turns out to be love. This is a new interpretation of Scripture which amounts to a new Scripture. Jesus brought forth truth, new and old, and he pictured this in one of his briefest parables, when he said “every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matt 13:52).

And what he taught helps to form a community. His teaching gives people purpose and identity. He is still proclaiming release to the captives today, recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free. He seeks to free us now from oppressive religious ideas, like the old idea of God as a punishing tyrant. Jesus was anointed and sent by God, and he is here with us now. He taught and demonstrated love as no one ever has, so impressing the centurion who later supervised his execution that the man said afterward, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mark 15:39).

The new community is like a garden that Jesus has planted. We are each to be a “tree of life,” as Proverbs says (11:30), or “oaks of righteousness,” as Isaiah says (61:3). Imagine us all as spiritual trees bearing spiritual fruit.

Through his Spirit within us, Jesus continues to call forth treasures old and new. We get to produce some of these new treasures through our spiritual advancement. He sings a new song through each of us. Go forth, knowing that Jesus is singing and working through you. He will bring forth new treasures through you. In the privacy of your prayer tonight, let him know that you are willing to cooperate with his work in you, that you are willing to be part of the garden that he will make to bloom. Be a living tree planted by Jesus.