### “Reading Out” Steve Finlan for The First Church, January 26, 2025

**Nehemiah 8:1–9**

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. . . 2Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law . . . 3and 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 . . . 6Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. They bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. . . 8So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. . . 9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor . . . 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 . . . 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. . . He stood up to read, 17and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He 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.”

In our very secular culture, we have many movies, comics, and songs to absorb our attention. It is hard to imagine how meaningful the Bible was to people in Israel and Judah, even when they had been cut off from the Bible for many years as a result of being politically exiled. We see the intensity of meaning it had for them when, upon hearing it read to them, they all were crying (Nehemiah 8:9). Returned from exile, they were hearing the words for the first time in many years, and it moved them to tears.

You can imagine that not just reading, but interpretation, was also important. Nehemiah mentions it, and in the gospel story from Luke, Jesus offers a brief interpretation of the Isaiah passage, saying that it is being fulfilled in their time. This was a bold claim, asking that people see Jesus’ preaching and healing as signs of the fulfillment of the Isaiah passage. He was doing his fellow townsmen the favor of announcing the beginning of his public ministry to them, but they did not appreciate it. Perhaps familiarity bred contempt; they had seen Jesus growing up from boyhood, and now here he was as a man telling them he was fulfilling messianic promises. Next week we will look at the Nazareth rejection, which is an illustration of the fact that a prophet is not without honor—*except* in his own country and in his own village. We’ll look at the reasons why in next week’s sermon.

The Jews had a range of Messianic hopes and ideas. Not everybody had the same ideas. Some had very political hopes; they wanted Judah to overthrow the Romans and punish all the Gentiles. Others had a more spiritual notion, which included Gentiles. Some of the more advanced ideas were found in Isaiah, and Jesus chose one of those passages, Isaiah 61, that spoke of the Messiah’s being blessed by the Spirit and setting out to bring good news, to liberate, and to save. That is the passage he used to announce his own Messianic ministry, with his bold and shocking statement, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). He also dropped in a phrase from Isaiah 35 about healing the blind (Isa 35:5; Luke 4:18). I want to focus on these four intentions: bringing good news, liberating, saving, healing.

The announcement itself is a proclamation of good news. A new message of salvation is going to come through him, and it will bring joy to many. You can feel the buoyant and uplifting tone of the message when you read it; you can guess the exhilaration people felt when they were told that God loves them and has set out to save them. The gospel is amazing good news, standing in contrast to the cynicism and harshness of life as it is often experienced on this world. It seems that love and trust are really more normal. It is cruelty, hostility, and isolation that are out of place in God’s world, despite how widespread they are. The darker the situation you have lived in, the more powerful the contrast is when you hear the good news.

And we have to understand the message spiritually. It is not just the *economically* poor, but the spiritually poor and needy, who will hear his good news. And it is probably not literal captives whom he will release, but those who had been held captive by tradition-dominated and ritual-dominated religion. And it is not just the literally blind, but those who have been mentally blinded by a narrow viewpoint, whose eyes he will open. Some Pharisees, such as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, were saved by his message, and presumably saved from the narrow literalism and ritualism of the Pharisaic party. Later, Saul of Tarsus will also be saved from such fleshly literalism, and he will say God “has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor 3:6). Narrow fundamentalism is enslaved to literalism, to the *letter*, and misses the *spiritual* meaning of the Bible.

And some of the things from which we need healing are spiritual problems: self-centeredness, cruelty, fear, despair. In Jesus, there is healing for all these defects.

The spiritual meaning always works to grow our spiritual character. The spiritual meaning reaches through our mind into our hearts, where our deepest values lie. For instance, when Jesus says that living water will flow out of the believer’s heart (John 7:38), he is not referring to literal water but to spiritual blessings and capacities. When he spoke of bearing fruits, he was not giving agricultural advice, but speaking of manifesting spiritual qualities. The church fathers taught that the spiritual sense of a text was the truly *rational* or *logical* sense, since it grows from the Logos. Further, they taught that the followers of Christ are supposed to meditate and pray, seeking the deep spiritual meaning of any text they read (remnantnewspaper.com/web/ index.php/fetzen-fliegen/item/7053-saint-gregory-of-nyssa-and-the-spiritual-interpretation-of-sacred-scriptures).

Jesus fulfills the deepest spiritual hopes of the prophets when he frees us from narrow-mindedness, fearfulness, and slavery to rituals. Have you experienced release from captivity? Have you recovered spiritual sight? Have you drunk of the living waters? Jesus has an effect on all those who learn from him.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, spoke of an experience he had, when he heard someone preaching from the Letter to the Romans. As the preaching “was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had . . . saved me from the law of sin and death.” The next day at church he sang “My song shall be always of the loving-kindness of the Lord,” and he said to himself “I have now peace with God” (biblehub.com/library/ wesley/the\_journal\_of\_john\_wesley/i\_felt\_my\_heart\_strangely.htm).

I hope that you feel certainty and warmth in your heart when you read the words that Jesus spoke on that day. He brings good news, he releases those who are captive to fear or uncertainty, and he heals the sick heart.