

EPIPHANY 3C 2025
Immanuel Highlands Episcopal Church
Wilmington, Delaware
January 26, 2025

Today's readings give us a lot to consider. The entire book of Nehemiah is about a servant in the Persian court who is Jewish, and hears that things aren't going well with his people who have returned to their homeland after exile in Babylon.

Paul's writing to the church in Corinth comes to a group of people who are in conflict, and many accepted practices are more about pleasing a few instead of being a people who follow Jesus of Nazareth. But they're new to their faith, and don't yet have any of the writings we know as the Christian Bible, except for Paul's letters to them.

Then there's the Gospel lesson from Luke. Jesus' ministry is just getting started, and he goes home. Those gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth, which is just about everyone in town, want to hear what this hometown boy gone bigtime has to say. Turns out, they don't like it all that much, which is next week's lesson, except that next Sunday is a major feast day, so we we'll be jumping back in time to just after Jesus' birth.

Nehemiah asks permission to return to his homeland to assist in the rebuilding of Jerusalem and Judah. The protective walls around the city are reduced to rubble, its gates destroyed. Neighboring kingdoms remain a threat, and the returned exiles live in fear and confusion.

After the walls are rebuilt and the gates put in place, it's time to get to the heart of the matter. Ezra, a priest and scribe, is assisted by others as he takes a copy of the Torah and begins reading it to the assembly. Most of those gathered had never heard these words, the implication being that because they have not been faithful to their heritage and teaching, life is in turmoil.

They hear these ancient words and begin weeping. But instead of showing remorse, they are told to go prepare a feast, and to share it with their neighbors. While the words they hear reveal the reasons why life is difficult, they also tell of God's unending declaration that they remain God's people. Of course, later in Nehemiah they have to be reminded of this again, because even in the fifth century before the common era, old habits died hard.

Paul writes to people who are new to their professed faith, but who continue to live their old ways. Jealousy, even greed, lead to conflict among them. Getting what they want seems more important than serving the needs of the less fortunate among them. They've fallen into the same traps as the Judeans of Nehemiah's time, which is the same trap set for those first human beings way back in the beginning.

Jesus' hometown folks aren't much different. After reading the appointed lesson for the day from Isaiah, Jesus sits down, which is Jewish custom, and begins teaching

them by saying "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Most of the time we follow the example of the folks from Nazareth, and hear these words speaking only about Jesus. We might even go back several centuries and insist that Isaiah also meant them about Jesus. I think both interpretations continue the vein begun in the garden, which means they help keep us from getting the point.

That point is that there continue to be forces around us whose purpose is to replace the God we gather to worship. They point to cracks in our understanding, introducing fear and mistrust that grow and cause the fissure to widen. In the garden, it was questioning the understanding of death. In Nehemiah's time, it was about security and prosperity, much as it continues to be in our own time. For Paul and the church in Corinth, it was about their relationships with each other, and with believers in other places. Again, true in our own time.

And for those in Nazareth, they think that Jesus is only speaking about himself. He turns their thinking on its head during his short visit, pointing out that their own history shows that God cares for more than just themselves. Their response is to reject him and even try to lead him to a cliff to throw him off it. It's a lesson all supply clergy need to understand in case a warden wants to offer the view from the bell tower after the service has ended.

The Psalmist gives us a view of God as a pervasive life that enters into all that is, and that all life in turn points to God. Consider that and hear Isaiah's words in a different way:

The Spirit of the LORD is upon you,
because God has anointed you
to bring good news to the poor.
He sends you to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the abundant life of God's eternal presence.

What is your reaction to that? Should I be happy that there is no readily accessible bell tower here? As Paul tries to convince the Corinthians, you are members of Christ's body, called in your baptism to continue the work of Jesus of Nazareth. So those words read by Jesus that day also refer to you and to his followers everywhere in every time. The presence of the Holy Spirit, which is the anointing referred to, is the very life of God that surrounds us to show us that even in our most troublesome times and situations, we are never alone.

What that means for us going forward remains to be seen.