

Fulfilled in Your Hearing, a sermon in response to Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; and Luke 4:14-21 by Rev. Scot McCachren at First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, 1-27-2019. (*Originally formatted to assist oral presentation, including irregular punctuation.*)

The Word of God. +++ Written... Read aloud... Listened to... Studied... Interpreted... Proclaimed, from this pulpit – and pulpits all over the world... +++ +++ The Word of God. +++ Instructing... Challenging... Provoking anger and controversy... Bringing people together... Showing how to love. +++ The Word of God. +++ Not static... Never fully contained in printed words... But **alive**... Ever new... Ever revealed by the Holy Spirit... +++ and **Fulfilled in Your Hearing**... when you allow it to enter and change your life... and expose your heart to God. +++ +++ Week after week we come together and read these Holy Scriptures; we rediscover how the Divine Word applies to this world we live in today – how it can guide every aspect of our lives. +++ But sometimes it's worth **taking the time to step back and celebrate the Word of God itself** – to bask in it – *ancient* yet ever *new*... to remember how it moves among us, how it's renewed, and connects us to our Lord.+++

That's what each of this morning's scripture readings call us to do – a Psalm that takes delight in the *torah*, the Law of God;; a retelling, in Nehemiah, of the People of God gathering to hear the Law read and interpreted by Ezra;; and Luke's account of Jesus – at the very beginning of his ministry – reading in the crowded synagogue, from the scrolls of the prophet Isaiah and – with the Spirit of the Lord upon him, claiming his place as the fulfillment of the Hebrew prophecies. +++ This morning I'd like to look at **each** of these with you – to see what they are telling us about receiving – and proclaiming – the Word of God.

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Psalm 19 starts by witnessing God's intimate connection to the cosmos on a grand scale – the heavens – the firmament – the sun... day... night... ... and then, on a smaller scale, but just as intense – with humanity... the soul – the heart – the eyes. +++ The Psalmist sees no difference in the laws that govern the perfect timing of heavenly bodies like the sun – and the laws of Torah that perfectly govern God's people. And the cosmos actually *testify* to God's glory just as surely as Scripture does – just in a different way. +++ Listen again to the opening verses of the Psalm: “The heavens are **telling** the glory of God; and the firmament **proclaims** his handiwork. Day to day pours forth *speech*, and night to night declares *knowledge*. There is no *speech*, nor are there *words*; their voice is not *heard*; yet **their voice goes out** through all the earth, and their **words** to the end of the world.” +++ And then, in the next breath...: “The **law** of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the **decrees** of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple.” The Holy Scriptures make our hearts rejoice, give us wisdom, lead us on righteous paths, and keep us safe. +++ But there's more – both the laws of physics and of **Torah** instruct us – teach us – and show us the way – but ultimately that's not enough... +++ After *all that*, the Palmist asks, “But who can **detect** their **errors**? **Clear me** from my hidden faults... **THEN** I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.” +++ We rely on God's grace and forgiveness to make us pure again – we rely on God's actual **presence** among us ... +++ THAT'S how **Torah** – how the *Word of God* – comes alive in our lives – it's not words on a page – it's the Holy Spirit **working** on us **through** those words and in countless other ways – and how we proclaim it to the world. +++ And so, it's fitting that the Psalmist concludes with the words we pray together at this time each week, preparing to proclaim the Word: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”... As our **rock**, God provides the courage and strength to proclaim the Gospel – and as our **redeemer**, the Lord forgives us when we fail.

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Our passage from Nehemiah recounts the beautiful story of God's people, gathered together again in Jerusalem to hear the Torah after a generation in Babylonian exile, where it was forbidden. Let's try to appreciate the profound impact this reading on the people. What if everyone in **our** community was suddenly taken away and forbidden from practicing our religion **for 70 years**. By the end of that time, our children and grandchildren might know they had come from Christian families, but they don't really know what that **means**. They have **heard** of Jesus, but only in scattered stories told in hushed tones. +++ Then, one day, it's time to come home. There are a **few** left who were here before – who had been old enough to remember the old white church on main street – but not many. So, soon after getting back in town, the community gathers... **right here – in the overgrown ruins of this church**. A community elder steps up to what's left of this pulpit and says, “Listen for the Word of God,” and begins reading the Gospel of Jesus Christ – aloud... The nativity – temptation in the wilderness – the Sermon on the Mount – Christ's

compassion, healing, and feeding... - the parables... Jesus' arrest... his crucifixion... resurrection... and his charge to the disciples to go and spread the Good News to all the nations. +++ And it's not just *read* – through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, it's interpreted – explained – so everyone understands what it means. +++ +++ **That's** what happening in Nehemiah when Ezra steps up to read the Torah to God's People. They rediscover the Word of God and begin **weeping** over it... But Ezra tells them: **this is not something to weep over – the Word of God is something to celebrate – it calls you into action – calls you to feed the hungry – and to find strength in the Lord.** +++ When we truly engage it, the Word of God brings us *life* – especially when we do so together, as a community – when we encounter the Holy Spirit working through the Word to *change* us – and working **through us**, to change the **world**. +++ Scripture wasn't complete just in the writing – it's not meant to be put set aside and revered as God's **one and final** statement about love – about Truth – about God's own nature. It's **alive** with the Spirit – just as it was when Ezra read, thousands of years ago. +++ **The Lord is still speaking through the Word** – every time you encounter it. The scriptures are **FULFILLED IN YOUR HEARING** them. +++ +++ +++ +++

Our Book of Confessions speaks to this... in 1983's "A Brief Statement of Faith": It reads, in part: "The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles **rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed**, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church."

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And that brings us, finally to our Gospel reading. After all the drama and fanfare of the nativity, with a dramatic and dangerous birth in strange surroundings, and singing choruses of angels, ... followed by the drama of Jesus' temptation by the devil in the wilderness... +++ the beginning of his ministry is quiet – almost subtle – by comparison. Jesus returns to Galilee as reports spread through all the surrounding country about him. On the Sabbath day, he goes to the synagogue like always. He stands to read – also nothing out of the ordinary. By providence, he is given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and he begins reading... +++ +++ Now, let's stop there for a moment because something remarkable happens next. It's not that he uses his gifts of oratory to give a particularly skilled reading – or that he gives a long sermon, explaining Isaiah to all who were gathered there. No, it's not like that at all. Instead, the people in the synagogue that day remind me of the people of Israel, gathered around Ezra and **truly hearing** their scriptures for the first time... In fact, it's a **hushed** scene,... filled with quiet pauses,... and plenty of space to think. +++ Listen again to that pivotal moment: "He stood up to read,... and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him... He unrolled the scroll... and found the place where it was written: '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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' ... And 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... ...**Then** he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been **fulfilled in your hearing**.'" +++ And yes, that does signal that Jesus himself fulfills Isaiah's prophecy. But notice exactly what Christ says: Not "this scripture is fulfilled by **my** arrival" or "...in **my** reading." ...NO... He says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled **IN YOUR HEARING**." +++

The power of Scripture isn't in the fact that it exists... or that it sits on your shelf, ready to dispense authoritative rules for how to live your life. +++ The **GOOD NEWS** is...the Word of God is powerful **when we encounter it – alive – with the Holy Spirit**. That's why the portion of our service set aside for "Proclaiming God's Word" opens with a Prayer for Illumination – to open ourselves to God's work among us as we encounter the Word. It's why we **share** opportunities to read the Word, as a **community**... and it's why we **proclaim** the Word each week from this pulpit – *interpreting* it through a sermon – and through music. We do what Ezra did – reminding ourselves who we are – and **whose** we are – by encountering the Word of God together. +++ +++ **Let us** do more than *read* the Word together. **Whichever** book,... chapter,... and verse... we encounter – **let us listen**... for how it teaches us to **live**... how it teaches us to **love**... and what it calls us **to do**.

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.