

THE BASIS OF SERVANTHOOD

Neh. 8:1-12; 1 Cor. 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

3rd Sun. in Ord. (C)

Jan. 25, 2004 Adelphi (Annual Cong. Meeting)

From early morning until midday, that is, about 6 hours of time, the Israelites listened to the Word read and interpreted to them.

What a long sermon? Most of us, perhaps all of us, cannot stand that kind of long hours of listening to God's Word. When I was in seminary, we were trained to be able to complete a sermon in 12 minutes. We were told that people could not concentrate more than 12 minutes. You can tell me how true that is? The Industrial Revolution certainly has changed us, changed our life style, changed our perception of time.

All of you come to church to attend any service or bible study on your own initiatives. Nobody forces you to do so.

Like you, the Israelites in this particular instance also took the initiative to gather in the temple and to ask the scribe to read the Word of the Lord to them. They have just completed the Wall around Jerusalem. They feel much settled down.

They gather themselves into the square before the Water Gate of the Temple. It is a less restrictive area where clergy and lay people, men and women, can gather together. They gather because they want to hear the Word of the Lord.

They ask the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses to them. The law of Moses, in our understanding today is the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. In Hebrew, it is called the Torah.

Scholars speculated that in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the Torah is pretty much compiled and completed. The Scribe Ezra brings the law of Moses and reads to all the men and women who assemble. At that time, most people could not read or write. The scribes were the ones who were educated to read and write.

Today, most people read and write. Most people have at least a copy of the Bible in their homes. Coming to church on Sunday mornings to hear the Word read to you perhaps is not a very special occasion anymore; yet it is still a time that you would hear the Word read to you in a public worship setting.

It is meant to be different from when you read from your own bible at home. It is supposed to give you a sense of community, and reverence for God. Look at how these people who assembled in front of the Water Gate listened to the Word read and interpreted.

First of all, as soon as Ezra opens the book, all the people stand up. Standing up to listen to the Word of God was a tradition in church worship. In some traditions, it is still appropriate to stand up to receive God's Word.

At the King's College in Cambridge, England, every Christmas Eve, a service of nine lessons and carols is held. When the ninth lesson is read and usually read by the most senior and learned clergy, all people need to stand up to receive the Word.

Our bodily gesture is a silent language of worship. Standing up to receive the Word of the Lord is a way to show our reverence, our respect, our awe as we listen to the Word of the Lord read.

Karl Barth, the 20th century Reformed theologian, says that "The Word of God is God." It is with such awe and reverence that I read the Bible to you every Sunday morning. "The Word of God is God."

After Ezra finished reading the book, he blessed the Lord, and all the people lift up their hands and say, "Amen, Amen." They also bow their heads and worship the Lord with their faces to the ground.

Response and participation of people in public worship is vital. Through your own words of prayers, through your singing, through your amens, or through your bodily gestures, you worship God under the leadership of the worship leaders.

After the Word is read, many Levites help people understand the law. How do they help people understand the law? They read the law of God with interpretation. The interpretation here may mean many different things. But at least, they mean two different aspects.

One is translating, from one language to another. The Old Testament is written in Hebrew. Most Israelites, after generations of exile in Persian Empire do not know Hebrew anymore. They speak Aramaic, which is the language used in Persian Empire. So, the Word of God is read in Hebrew, then, it is translated into Aramaic so that people can understand. We are more fortunate today that we have the Bible in our own languages.

The other aspect is interpreting, like a sermon, explaining and applying the Word of God to contemporary situations. Karl Barth has a famous saying, "A minister has to hold the Bible in one hand and hold the newspapers in the other" meaning that the Word is living and the Word continues to speak to our contexts even 2000 years after. We can still find the Will of God on the pages of the Bible in the 21st century.

That's why it took so long, 6 hours. Reading in Hebrew. Reading in Aramaic. Then, a sermon.

What is people's reaction? They weep. Perhaps, they haven't heard the Word of the Lord for so long that they feel the presence of the God in their lives again. Perhaps, the law of God speaks to them and make them feel guilty about their faith and their lives. We don't know the reasons of their weeping, but we know the Word of the Lord somehow speaks profoundly to their hearts.

Yet, Ezra says to them, “do not weep for today is holy, go home, eat the fat and drink the sweet wine, and share your food with your neighbors who have nothing to eat. Rejoice, today. The joy in the Lord is your strength.”

Whenever we think about the law, we think that the law is for accusation of our sinful nature. Yet, the law is to correct us and guide us. The law is to teach us and turn us back to God. The law of God is precious in our life. We cannot live without the law of God that corrects us, guides us, teaches us, and turns us back to God.

The Word of God certainly has changed these people. They go home, rejoice in the holy day, and share their foods with others. They do not keep the joy to themselves, but they share. They share through giving food to other people who do not have food.

About 400 years later, another passage of the Bible is read in public worship. This time, the location is in Nazareth, a small town in Galilee. The reader is Jesus. The Scripture selection is from the book of Isaiah. It is not the Law of Moses. It is prophet Isaiah’s comforting words to the people of exile.

It is the passage about the good news of liberation, liberation from blindness, from captivity, and from oppression. After Jesus reads the passage, people are so amazed at his reading.

Yet, if you continue to read further, which will be our gospel reading for next Sunday, you will find out that Jesus, like Ezra, also interprets the Word he read, but people got so angry with him, at the way he interprets the Scripture.

People do have different reactions when they listen to the Word of God read and interpreted. Some weep. Some rejoice. Some got angry. Some become upset and never come back to the church again.

Rev. Fred Rogers, a Presbyterian minister and the host of Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood who passed away in the spring of 2003, once told a story. He said he went to a church and heard a sermon that he thought was the worst sermon he had ever heard of. He was very depressed. However, as he was walking out of the church and talking with a woman, this woman said to him, “Oh, that was a wonderful sermon. It really spoke to my heart.” The woman told him how the sermon touched her.

Mr. Rogers made a conclusion that the Holy Spirit can work in people’s hearts for good even through the worst sermon.

I know there are what you would call “bad” sermons, sermons that do not really interpret the Word in its proper context. But I do believe what Mr. Rogers said, “The Holy Spirit can work in people’s hearts even through a poor sermon.”

Calvin, our Reformed father, says, “The Word preached and heard is the Word of God.” The Word is always read and preached in worship. Yet, the Word preached is not the Word of God until it is also heard.

The difference between Ezra’s audience and Jesus’ audience, I think, is that Ezra’s audience is hungry for God’s Word. They come to listen to the Word of God with an attitude of reverence and awe that the Word read to them is God. They meet God in God’s Word.

Notice that the Israelites saying amens, bowing their heads to worship God right after Ezra read from the Bible in Hebrew, which they did not understand. Yet, the language does not matter. They know the Word read is God.

The Word read and preached to them is God’s very presence with them. They are ready to be changed and transformed in that very presence of God. They listen to the Word of God read and preached with their whole heart, mind, and soul.

The word “to hear” in Hebrew means active listening. It means listen and obey. Listen to the Word of God and obey the Word of God. This is the basis of Christian life. Listening and obeying the Word of God is the basis of servanthood.

Listening and obeying what Paul says in the first Corinthians. He emphasizes the importance of different members of one body. Nobody can say, “I don’t need you.” Nobody can despise other parts of the body. The weaker members are indispensable. Honor and respect are due to those who are less respectable.

Do you hunger and thirst for the Word of God? Do you hunger and thirst for the presence of God in your life? If we are to grow stronger as a church, as one body in Christ, we must listen and obey the Word of the Lord. Live together in love, humility, and respect for one another.