

EPIPHANY 3

Year C

Lynnaia Main serves as The Episcopal Church Representative to the United Nations, a staff member of the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church's Global Partnerships team. Prior to joining the staff, she studied and worked for 25 years in international relations and political science in United Nations, academic, and business settings. Her desire to follow God's vocational call led her through a discernment process that pointed to lay ministry, and shortly thereafter she joined the Church's staff. She has served for many years as a lay leader at the Eglise française du Saint Esprit in New York City and on boards and committees in the Diocese of New York.

This Bible study is part of a series produced by the Office of Global Partnerships of The Episcopal Church.

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

¹ All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. ² Accordingly, Ezra the priest 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. ³ He 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.

⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people, and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

⁸ So 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. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord, and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

Commentary from Lynnaia Main

The Old Testament book of Nehemiah focuses on the period when Persia conquered Babylon, and an edict from the Persian King Cyrus allows Jewish exiles to return to Israel from Babylon. Nehemiah, the Jewish governor under Persian rule, rebuilds Jerusalem's walls and oversees many reforms, including rebuilding the Temple. Temple worship begins again and, along with it, a program of teaching the Torah, the Mosaic law, which was considered the foundation for godly and moral behavior.

Chapter 8 describes a great celebration taking place, that of the reconstruction by the rededicated community. In our current passage, we hear of the first public reading of the Torah. The people gather near one of the gates and ask the priest and scribe, Ezra, to read from Leviticus. Ezra opens the book in front of the people and reads from the law in Hebrew, "from early morning until midday", while assistants translate and interpret. Ezra blesses the Lord, and the people answer "Amen." This public reading of scriptures is the start of the practice that will continue throughout Jewish and Christian traditions.

Indeed, this scene of a religious authority figure reading the foundational scriptures in front of the people mirrors our typical modern Sunday worship services, apart from a few differences. First, the people are returning to worship after a long absence. Second, the intensity of their reaction is not often seen in church these days: "For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law." Ezra tells them not to be grieved on this holy day; rather, he reminds them to celebrate and

feast, while saving and sharing a portion of their bounty with the less fortunate. He reminds them that “the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Discussion Questions

Have you ever been so moved by a reading of Scripture that it has caused you to weep? What was the passage, and what was the circumstance? How did this impact your spiritual life?

Ezra associates holy days with celebration and joy, enjoying eating and drinking, not grief or lament. The people are told to share their portions with those who have none. What new insights does this Scripture prompt for you about how sacred holy days could be observed in our time?

Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest, and the Temple assistants work together to provide a place for the people to hear and learn the Torah in a way that preserves the divine authority and dignity of the scriptures while making them accessible to the people. How do you see this interaction of governing and spiritual authorities working together in your own local congregational context? Is the relationship harmonious or are changes needed to improve partnerships that will spiritually benefit the people?

Psalm 19

- ¹ The heavens declare the glory of God, *
and the firmament shows his handiwork.
- ² One day tells its tale to another, *
and one night imparts knowledge to another.
- ³ Although they have no words or language, *
and their voices are not heard,
- ⁴ Their sound has gone out into all lands, *
and their message to the ends of the world.
- ⁵ In the deep has he set a pavilion for the sun; *
it comes forth like a bridegroom out of his
chamber; it rejoices like a champion to run its
course.
- ⁶ It goes forth from the uttermost edge of the heavens
and runs about to the end of it again; *
nothing is hidden from its burning heat.
- ⁷ The law of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul; *
the testimony of the Lord is sure and gives
wisdom to the innocent.
- ⁸ The statutes of the Lord are just and rejoice the
heart; *
the commandment of the Lord is clear and
gives light to the eyes.
- ⁹ The fear of the Lord is clean and endures for ever; *
the judgments of the Lord are true and
righteous altogether.
- ¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold, more than
much fine gold, *
sweeter far than honey, than honey in the
comb.
- ¹¹ By them also is your servant enlightened, *
and in keeping them there is great reward.
- ¹² Who can tell how often he offends? *
cleans me from my secret faults.
- ¹³ Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous
sins; let them not get dominion over me; *
then shall I be whole and sound, and innocent
of a great offense.
- ¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of
my heart be acceptable in your sight, *
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Commentary from Lynnaia Main

In exquisite, poetic prose, the psalmist conveys through two distinct passages the same message, that divine wisdom illuminates our lives. The first portion (vv. 1 – 6) describes how the daily movements of the sun, the simple, ordinary-yet-extraordinarily unique passings of each day, “declare the glory of God” and “show his handiwork.” The same day, viewed by all, across all corners of the earth, tells the same story about the Creator of all.

The second portion of the psalm (vv. 7-12) describes as “perfect” the law and the Lord’s divine guidance. An array of reverent descriptors unfolds: “reviv[ing] the soul,” “sure,” “giv[ing] wisdom,” “just,” “rejoic[ing] the heart,” “clear,” “giv[ing] light to the eyes,” “true,” “righteous,” “more to be desired... than gold,” “enlighten[ing].” The law gives light to our consciences in the same way that the sun gives light to our days. God’s wisdom illuminates and helps to “keep [us] from presumptuous sins.”

Weaving these two distinct analogies into one overarching theme, the psalmist conveys not only the message that divine wisdom and guidance are available to all regardless of education or ability – we need only observe and reflect on the daily movement of the sun – but also that our deliberate dedication to learning God’s statutes will satisfy our longings for guidance and feed our hunger for spiritual well-being.

Discussion Questions

Evangelism is difficult in our secularized societies, and even illegal in some countries where Episcopal/Anglican churches are located. Yet the increasing social awareness of the urgency of caring for the environment is a link to thinking about creation and Creator. How might society’s renewed interest in caring for creation open doors for us to share our love of God and creation with others? Have you encountered these shared concerns or conversations with people in your own life or church?

Are there any portions of God's "law" that have been so enlightening for you that you can relate to the psalmist's reverential attitude? Have you ever felt that you were being providentially protected from "presumptuous sins" through illuminating wisdom gained from God's teachings?

What revelations were involved in your coming to awareness of God's existence and guidance? Was it more of an instinctual understanding such as observing the movement of the sun, or were you taught in a more methodical way about God's existence and divine plans?

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

¹²For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members yet one body. ²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect, ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work powerful deeds? ³⁰Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Commentary from Lynnaia Main

In this epistle, the apostle Paul writes from Ephesus (modern Turkey) around 57 AD, to Christians in the church of Corinth, a church which he had founded. Corinth was a Greco-Roman city, a major port and industrial crossroads and a center for the arts. Its centrality meant that its residents came from diverse places and ethnicities. Paul responds here to two letters he has received from the Christians in Corinth, about divisions and disunity that have taken root in the church.

In his response, Paul describes the interdependent body of Christ, one body with many parts, each with its function, its entirely noble and differentiated purpose and its own gifts it contributes to the whole body. We are all part of this body of Christ because we are all baptized in the one Spirit and made to drink of one Spirit. “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free,” our status apart from the body is irrelevant. In this metaphor comparing society to a body, the weaker parts are not inferior but rather equalized in their value through receiving greater honor. Hence, any sense of hierarchy or power is neutralized by this paradoxical reversal.

If we are a stronger or more honorable member, we must remember that others who are weak or may seem inferior to us are nevertheless indispensable and honorable. If we see ourselves as a weaker or less worthy member of the body of Christ, it will help us to remember that greater honor is ours as inferior members, thus leveling our positions so that there is no dissension within the body. Since God has distributed diverse gifts across the body, we do not need to envy or feel ambitious about having another’s gifts, nor believe that one member’s gifts are worth more than another’s.

Discussion Questions

We live in an era when Christians of good conscience, despite contemplating these same words from Paul applicable in our own day, are at odds with each other and may not see themselves as part of the same body or even tolerate being part of the same body. As a member of the body of Christ, how do you feel drawn by the Spirit to respond, and what actions might you take to help heal and unify the body?

In what ways might you, as a member of the body of Christ, contribute to “greater honor” for members who appear weaker or inferior? What particular gifts do you bring to the body in this regard? What obstacles prevent your action and what new possibilities spring to mind that might encourage equity and unity?

Luke 4:14-21

¹⁴Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region. 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, 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 set free those who are oppressed,

¹⁹to 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.”

Commentary from Lynnaia Main

Luke writes of Jesus’ return to Galilee, after having been tempted by the devil in the wilderness. He is now filled with the power of the Spirit and about to begin his ministry in Galilee. Jesus begins to teach in the synagogues and word begins to spread about him through the surrounding country. When he arrives on the Sabbath day at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, which would have been his usual practice when he lived there, he stands up and reads from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...” along with subsequent verses that seem to describe the ministry he is beginning. This might have appeared to the listeners in the synagogue to be simply a regular reading of the scriptures... until Jesus goes on to say, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

One might think that those who were listening to Jesus in the synagogue that day would have been incredulous about his seemingly self-important

conclusions. On the contrary, although it is not included in the passage chosen for this commentary, the next verse reveals that his actions are, at first, well received: “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’”

Discussion Questions

Imagine yourself in the synagogue the day that Jesus read these scriptures aloud. What would have been your reaction to his declaring, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”? What would have convinced you that his seemingly outlandish statement should be taken seriously?

As Christians, we believe that God calls each of us to ministry. Imagine that you, like Jesus, are called to read this Isaiah passage that begins with “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” What actions of ministry would you describe thereafter? What *has* God called you to do at this point in your life, or what *is* God calling you to do?