

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

In Act and Fact

The Third Sunday After Epiphany

January 24, 2010

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Nehemiah 8:1-10

All the people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. ²

So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. ⁴ Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam. ⁵ Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷ The Levites--Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah--instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. ⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared.

This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

The goal of advertising often is to create a need for a product where no need existed before. For example, how did people who washed their clothes with soap flakes know they really needed to use laundry detergent with extra whitening power granules? The advertisers created a need. First, they gave the facts about the new product in their ads in magazines, newspaper, and television and radion commercials. But along with the descriptions, they distributed free samples of the product so people could actually use it and see the results. They combine facts with the act of using the detergent. Today, advertising and marketing has become very psychologically sophisticated. Advertisers use "focus groups" of potential consumers to measure attitudes towards products so they can develop advertising campaigns that will encourage consumers to feel a need for a product.

Sometimes the Church uses this approach to market God. The hope is to create a felt need in the hearts and minds of people to interest them in church and in the Lord. But the reality is that every human being needs God, whether they feel it or not. What's missing in many of us is the realization of that need. As the saying goes, "we don't know that we don't know" that we need God.

But God is real. We worship an actual God. The dictionary defines "actual" as "real in both act and fact". A group of people for whom God is real in act, that is, in their experience, will have a much different attitude towards him than a group that considers him only a fact. Our readings this morning give us two "focus groups" that illustrate this.

The first group knows God is real in both act and fact. They are gathered in front of a gate in the wall of Jerusalem. They have recently returned there after 70 years of captivity in Babylon, almost 1,000 miles away. The city was in ruins, but they have just rebuilt the wall with their own hands. They have gathered on the Feast of Tabernacles or Feast of Booths, which is the feast of ingathering. It is symbolic of God gathering his people to himself from the ends of the earth. Most of these people were born in Babylon. Jerusalem was a place they had only heard of in stories their parents and grandparents told them. Even though the Lord had promised they would return, it seemed completely improbable to them. But now it has happened. This crowd, who grew up in captivity in a foreign country, find themselves standing inside the walls of their holy city. They stand from daybreak until noon listening attentively to Ezra and the Levites read from "the Book of the Law", from the first five books of the Bible. They hear about how their God created everything, and how humanity disobeyed him. They hear how God chose Abraham and his descendants—themselves—to be

his own people, and the terrible consequences if they disobeyed him. And they hear his promise to Moses in Deuteronomy 30:1-4: **“When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, 2 and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, 3 then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. 4 Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back.”**

The people weep uncontrollably. They weep because they are overwhelmed with gratitude to be standing in the very place they never ever thought they would visit, the holy city. They weep because they are overwhelmed with guilt at their sinful disobedience and the disobedience of their forefathers that brought on their deportation. And they weep in humility and love for the God who has kept his promise: **“the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back.”** The Lord their God *has* gathered them and brought them back. For these first returned Jews, God was not just real in fact. He was real in act. “Deliverer” or “Savior” were not just words they applied to God. They were things he had done for them. He had delivered them. He had saved them. In the words of the hymn, they had been “ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.”

But our second group has a different attitude. For them, God is real only in fact. These are the folks in Jesus’ hometown synagogue in Jerusalem. They hear him explicitly tell them that he himself is the Messiah, the Desire of Nations, standing right in front of them. Our reading stops there, but Luke goes on to give us their reaction: they dismiss Jesus completely. **“Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked.” (Luke 4:22)** Jesus knows their hearts. With God’s own insight he describes how God will respond to their attitude—the same way he responded it in the days of Elijah and Elisha. He points out that there were plenty of starving Jewish widows in Israel when Elijah miraculously provided food for the gentile widow from Zarephath in Philistine territory. There were plenty of Jewish lepers in Israel who needed healing when Elisha healed the Syrian gentile commander Naaman. Jesus’ hometown crowd is behaving just as Jesus has predicted. Luke tells us, **“All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff.” (Luke 4:28-29)**

One group stood on their feet for hours, tears streaming down their faces, listening attentively while Ezra read the first five books of the Bible. The

second group was offended to the point of violence when the Son of the God they and their forefathers worshiped introduced himself to them. Why this difference? Was Jesus using the wrong approach? Was he selling the wrong product? Of course not. The difference was that the people who stood listening to the Law knew God to be actual. They knew him in act as well as in fact. The people in the synagogue in Nazareth knew him only in fact.

Jesus' friends and neighbors in Nazareth actually descended from some of the same people who returned from Babylon with Ezra and Nehemiah, but they had become comfortable and complacent. Nazareth was a pretty prosperous place, and they managed to keep some distance from the political conflict that went on in Jerusalem. When Jesus quoted Isaiah's prophecy, applying it to himself, it sounded like nonsense. How could the Spirit of the Lord be upon Jesus, whom they'd known all his life? How could Jesus be anointed to preach good news to the poor? They weren't poor. What did he mean by saying he had been sent to **“proclaim freedom to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed,”** and so on? They certainly didn't see themselves as prisoners or blind, or oppressed. It was insulting!

The folks in Nazareth believed in God, but only in fact, the way we believe that there is dust on the surface of the moon. Their belief in God shaped their culture and their identity as Jews. It helped them differentiate themselves from other groups like the Romans, the Greeks, and the Samaritans. It was the source of interesting discussion from time to time in the synagogue. It gave them guidance in interpersonal relationships and how to conduct themselves in business and daily life.

On the other hand, their ancestors who listened to the Law knew God in act as well as fact. They knew he requires obedience and punishes disobedience, because they had experienced it. They knew he leads his people and keeps his promises. Those promises had come true in their own lives. They knew he was a God who blesses his covenant people and seeks after them to preserve them for his own glory because that is what he had done with them. They had experienced his own joy at their return, the “joy of the Lord” that is his people's strength. They knew the passion and love for him that this God who acts in the lives of his people stirs up when they repent and obey him. They knew him to be a God who changes and transforms his people to be more like him, because he had done that to them. They knew the actual God, real in act and fact.

God doesn't change. He is actual, real in both act and fact. Human nature doesn't change either. We are capable of profound spiritual blindness. We are always vulnerable to “not knowing that we don't know”. Let me ask each of us: Is God actual for you and for me? Is he real in act and in fact? Do we see him

interfering with the things we want to do by reminding us of what he wants us to do? Are we aware of him leading us, perhaps to do things and go places we wouldn't have chosen? Have we experienced him seeking after us and finding us and restoring us, even when we've given up on him and ourselves, and strayed very far away? Have you been "ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven?" If you have, you know it. Because you have, has God given you a passion and a love for him, and a desire to have him transform you more and more to be like him?

The city of Jerusalem was a remote idea to the Jewish people who had been living in Babylon for 70 years. But when they took God at his word and repented and took his opportunity to return, they discovered it was real, and so was God. There are people everywhere, good church people, for whom God is remote.

But God doesn't change. He acts in the lives of those who seek after him with all their heart, and who do not what they want, but what he wants. And what he wants is to impart his own holiness and life to those who don't know him. Our collect for today says it all. It asks God to give us grace to answer Jesus' call. What is that call? "To proclaim the Good News of Christ's salvation". We do this in word and in deed because God has rescued us from blindness, captivity to sin and the oppression of life without God. He commands us to share his immeasurable blessing with others. What will be the result? We will know God not just in fact, but in act. "we and the whole world will perceive the glory of his marvelous works." We will know God in act and in fact.

Let us pray.

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **AMEN.**