

READER RESPONSE

NEHEMIAH 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; LUKE 4:14-21
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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Each year, during the season of Epiphany, our church participates with other churches in our city in a Scripture reader exchange. We've been doing this for a long time.

Why?

Well, on the one hand it's a great opportunity for individuals in our churches to experience worship in other churches in our city.

It's also a way of expressing our conviction that though we worship in different buildings and belong to different denominations, we are all part of the same body of Christ.

But I think it's also an expression of our common conviction that Scripture reading is an important part of public worship. When we stand up and open up our bibles and read, it *matters*.

Or, at least, we're convinced that it should matter!

I often receive phone calls on Tuesday morning from our guest readers asking about protocol around Scripture reading in our church, or wondering which translations we use. Often, they will say that they want to practice the readings in advance.

We seem to know that when we stand up in front of a group of people to read Scripture, we're not just reading from any old book. These words are different. They're weightier. They tell an important story about who we are and about who God is.

This morning, our scripture readings are *about* Scripture readings.

Two stories separated by over five hundred years about someone standing up in front of a group of people and reading from a book or a scroll.

In both contexts, they also believed that this mattered. They believed that God was somehow speaking in and through this reading.

And that God expected something to happen in those who heard.

The title of my sermon this morning is “reader response.”

In the lofty realm of academic theories, there is a school of literary theory called “Reader Response.” This theory says that the main question we should ask when analyzing any piece of written work is what the *reader* makes of it rather than what the author intended to communicate.

In “reader response” theory, the text means what the reader decides it means, not necessarily what the author intended for it to mean.

Now, we would never want to say that when it comes to Scripture, it is the readers or the hearers that *determine* the meaning of the text.

Part of the reason that Scripture has always been held in such high esteem is because Christians have been convinced that God speaks authoritatively through the words of the Bible—God can tell us truths that stand over us and compel us to action.

The words of the Bible don’t mean whatever we, as readers happen to *want* them to mean or *think* they mean, much as some seem to think this is the case.

And yet, without a reader or a hearer to respond, the words of Scripture remain just black marks on white pages or sounds in the air.

This morning, I want to look at these two readings about readings, and at the responses to these readings.

And I want to ask the question, “What can we learn as we read and respond to Scripture all these years later?”

Let's start with Nehemiah. The people of Israel had been in exile. The Babylonians had hauled them off under Nebuchadnezzar.

Then, the Persians took their place—which turned out to be a good thing for the people of Israel because the Persian emperor, Cyrus, allowed some of them to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild their temple.

So, the task of leading the people fell to Nehemiah, the political leader, and Ezra the priest to lead these returnees. After a long process full of stops and starts, the temple was rebuilt, and the Ezra people gathered the people together in the square and read to them from the law.

It says that he read from early morning until midday. Six hours or so of reading the law. Sounds exciting, right?

I'm told that the average person's attention span today is around eight minutes. 😊
Maybe Ezra had a really great speaking voice.

At any rate, he reads from "the law," which would have been the Torah, the first five books of our Old Testaments.

And what is the response to this reading?

With *attentiveness* (v. 3).

With reverence—they stood up (v. 5). In some congregations, people still stand for the reading of the gospel text each week.

With amens (v. 6). Amen – may it be so, may it be as God says, not as we say!

And with weeping (v.9)/ It doesn't say why the people wept. Perhaps they were tears of joy at the symbolism of being a people together again, back in Jerusalem, back with a temple, back with the freedom to hear these foundational words about who they were and who God was and what they were supposed to do.

Perhaps they were tears of penitence for all of the ways that they had failed to live up to what the law required. This was, in fact, the reason that they were in exile in the first place.

The people of Israel were always beset by two categories of sin that led their downfall, two categories of sin prohibited in the law: Idolatry and injustice.

Idolatry – wrong relatedness to God

Injustice — wrong relatedness to others.

Perhaps the weeping at the hearing of the law was a recognition of their failures to do these things well, and a determination to do better from this time forward.

In our passage from Nehemiah, we see that the response to the reading of Scripture is one of reverence, of worship, of gratitude, and of penitence.

In our passage from Luke, it is Jesus himself who stands up and reads.

He reads from the prophet Isaiah—a powerful passage about the future hope of his people:

"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 favour.

This is what the people have been waiting for—the year of the Lord's favour! Wrong things being made right. Bad things being made good. God showing up to reclaim and redeem his people and take the story in a more hopeful direction than their present experience!

And what is the response to this reading, to this reader?

Well, we have to read a bit further to get the response. Let's pick it up where Barb left off in verse 22.

22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked. [So far so good!]

23 Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’”

24 “Truly I tell you,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. [*oh-oh, what’s Jesus doing here...?*]

25 I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. **26** Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. **27** And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”

28 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 off the cliff. 30 But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Oh dear. Things have taken a rather rapid turn for the worse here.

The initial response was one of amazement and appreciation at the “gracious words” that came from Jesus lips.

But Jesus keeps on talking, as Jesus so often does, and by the end of it all the words that came from Jesus’ lips have people wanting to throw him off a cliff!

Why?

It seems that people didn’t appreciate Jesus’ linkage of the prophecy from Isaiah about “good news for the poor” and “the year of the Lord’s favour” with the wrong sorts of people.

Why is he bringing up these uncomfortable historical reminders about how God was at work *outside* the people of Israel even back in Elijah’s and Elisha’s time? Why is he

talking about a widow in Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian? Why is he pointing out that even in the past God's favour extended *beyond* his chosen people, even, at times, *instead* of his chosen people?

Isaiah wasn't talking about *those people* in that passage that Jesus stood up to read! That's not what the text was about!

Or was it?

In Luke 4, we have a unique window into a time when the reader of Scripture was also its author. And the author gets to determine what a text means. And the author can take the story in a new direction.

Even when those listening don't like that new direction.

So what do these two texts have to say to us, all these many years later? How do these two examples of responses to readings inform our reading and hearing of Scripture?

Well, on the one hand, we learn from Nehemiah the crucial truth that Scripture is one of the ways in which God stands *over* his people, that it is to be honoured and revered and received with gratitude.

It can remind us who we are and who God is. It can call us to repent of the ways in which we are falling short, the ways in which we are failing to fulfill our proper role in the world, and call us back to what we were made to be and to do.

We learn from our passage in Luke that there is a higher authority even than Scripture.

We learn that the word of God (written) points to and is fulfilled by and is taken in an unexpected direction by the Word of God in flesh, Jesus Christ.

The Word of God in flesh can take an old reading and say audacious things like, "this is fulfilled by me!" The Word of God in flesh can apply old, well-understood words to new situations.

The Word of God in flesh can make things easier and harder at the same time.

Jesus could have saved Ezra around five hours and fifty-nine minutes in his reading of the law in the city square. He did, after all, say that *all of the law* could be summarized in two commands: love God and love neighbour.

Right relatedness to God; right relatedness to neighbour. Simple, right?

But what about when “neighbour” applies to widows in Zarephath? Or commanders of foreign armies like Naaman?

What about when “love your neighbour” applies to people we’re not so sure of today?

What about when it applies to people that make us afraid?

What about when it applies to those who might mistreat us?

What about when it applies to those that we secretly think we’re more worthy than?

What about when it applies to our enemies?

And what about when “loving God” isn’t a very popular thing to declare out loud in a culture that claims to have moved past all of that superstitious stuff, a culture that sees religion as a relic of a bygone age?

What about when we would prefer to recast Jesus as nothing more than a religious teacher who said inspiring things about how we were all supposed to love each other, and leave aside all of that inconvenient “God-talk?”

What about when we realize that in making things really simple for us, Jesus has actually made things rather difficult?

As readers and hearers of Scripture, I think we are always pulled in two directions.

We are called *back* to foundational truths about who we are and about who God is. We are called to remember who we are and to repent of the ways in which we have failed to be who God has called us to be.

We are also pushed *forward* to follow the Word of God in flesh into newness, into the new things that God is doing and will do through Jesus.

This is good. It's *good* that Jesus makes things very simple and very difficult for us.

It saves us from becoming people who read the Bible like an auto-repair manual or a cookbook, where we just mechanically follow the rules to achieve the proper result.

Many people do read the bible in precisely this way, unfortunately, but we're not supposed to.

We are supposed to always see that the reason the Bible exists is only and always to point to Jesus.

Christians sometimes refer to themselves as “people of the book” or say things like, “I believe in the bible” or “I stand on the authority of Scripture.” I understand why we say things like—we're trying to communicate that we want to anchor our lives on something solid and true.

But we are not “people of the book.” We are people of a person.

We are not bible-ians, we are Christ-ians.

We read Scripture because we want to know Jesus better. And we want to know Jesus better because we want the life that he offers.

That's why someone stands up here, week after week, and reads words from a very old book.

So, may God help us to be better readers and responders to Scripture. Even more importantly, may God help us to be better readers and responders to the Word of God in flesh, Jesus Christ.

May it never be said of us, what Jesus said to the people in John 5:

You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

May we always seek to be people who read and respond for the right reasons.

Amen.

