

The Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Nehemiah 8:2-4A, 5-6, 8-10
<i>Response</i>	Proclaim his marvelous deeds to all the nations
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 15
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 12:12-30
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The Lord sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, and to proclaim liberty to captives.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

The Third Sunday for Ordinary Time in Year C does something kind of interesting with the readings for the day. So in Year C we're traveling through the Gospel of Luke and, as we saw, the Second Sunday of Ordinary Time looked at the first miracle of Jesus in the transformation of water into wine at Cana, which is from the Gospel of John. So as we move into the third week of Ordinary Time for Year C, the Church actually begins its journey proper through the public ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke by taking two passages. The first four verses of the Gospel of Luke (the introduction of the gospel), and then it juxtaposes that with the first part of Jesus' sermon, his inaugural sermon, in the city of Nazareth, which was of course his hometown.

So, although in the gospel of Luke these are separated by several chapters, the Church puts them together today to begin our journey proper through Luke's gospel. So the gospel for today, we'll start there and then we'll look at how it goes with the Old Testament. In Luke 1:1-4, we read these words:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theoph'ilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed.

Alright, now at this point the lectionary skips literally 3 chapters of the gospel and goes down to Luke 4:14 and following and picks up there:

And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee, and a report concerning him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."¹

Okay. There is a lot going on here as we start journeying through Luke for ordinary time. Let's start with the first part of the passage, what's called the prologue to Luke's gospel. A number of scholars have studied this very carefully, and this is one of the best indicators in all four gospels that the genre of the gospels, the kind of books that they were, the kind of books that they thought they were writing, were historical biographies. It was very customary in the ancient Greco-Roman world for historians to begin their accounts of history with a prologue, a kind of a preface, in which the author addresses the audience, and explains to them what he's going to be doing, why he's doing it, and also he'll tend to emphasize where he's getting his evidence, and the reliability of the account that he's about to give. That's exactly what Luke does in this historical prologue to his gospel. In it he makes a few key out points that are really worth noting.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

First, notice Luke is very clear that there are already some written gospels in circulation. He says that “many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that Jesus has done during his life.” Most scholars assume that Luke here is referring, at the very least he’s referring to Mark. A number of others agree that he’s referring to Mark and Matthew, because those two gospels, a case can be made, that Luke is actually utilizing them both as sources. Although there is some debate about whether he uses Matthew or not, everyone agrees that he is actually using Mark as a source. Now that’s just two, he says “many”, so we don’t know exactly what he’s referring to there about previous accounts of the life of Jesus, but he’s going to be drawing on multiple sources in the composition of his gospel.

Second, Luke makes very clear that his material in his gospel is based on the testimony of eyewitnesses. That’s really crucial. Some scholars in the 20th Century said that the gospels were folklore, that they were myths, that they were folk tales, and just traditions told by people from one person to another, Christians passing on stories about Jesus without any control or authorized witnesses to his life. Well that’s just false. Luke makes very clear, and he wants you to know, that his account is based on the testimony of eyewitnesses, *Autoptai* in the Greek. It is where we get the word autopsy from. *Autos* means self, optic is to look. When someone does an autopsy, a doctor looks for himself at a body in order to examine the causes of death. So the Greek word *autoptai* literally means “people who saw for themselves” what Jesus did and what he said. Now, Luke would never emphasize that his gospel was based on eyewitness testimony if he was writing a fairy tale, or a folk legend, or a myth, or just even a treatise of theology. Paul writes theological letters and he never says, “Well, this idea is based on this eyewitness and that idea is based on that eye witness”. He will say that about historical events, but theology is reflection on events. So Luke’s not writing a book of theology, even though it is theological; he’s writing a gospel. He’s writing a biography of Jesus. He’s writing a historical account rooted in eyewitness testimony to things that Jesus really did and things that Jesus really said. And that concern for accuracy is reflected in the next point, where he says, “I wanted to give you an orderly account.”

Now the English translation “orderly” doesn’t quite capture the Greek. The Greek word here, *akribōs*, literally means “accurate”; “faithful to the event”. So he’s stressing here that he’s giving his reader an accurate account based on eyewitness testimony. And as I point out in the introductory video to the Gospel of Luke, the

reason he's having to stress that is because he himself was not an eyewitness to Jesus; he's a 2nd or 3rd generation Christian. By contrast, Matthew's gospel, which is attributed to an eyewitness, never has to say it's based on eyewitness testimony, because the title alone tells you that it's the testimony of one of the Twelve Apostles, who was an eye witness to Jesus. So there's a little bit of contrast there, for example, between Matthew and Luke.

One more point, in this prologue Luke mentions Theophilus, the addressee of the gospel. Now who is this Theophilus? The name Theophilus literally means "friend of God". *Theos* means "God", *Philos* means "friend", so, "friend of God". Some people have said all that means is that it's a symbolic recipient, everyone is a "friend of God", so "Luke's writing for everyone". That's probably unlikely because all ancient names had meanings. I wasn't like today, where some names just don't have any meaning whatsoever. They were usually compound words that had a certain meaning, like Jesus means "The Lord Saves". In this case, Theophilus is probably the name of an actual person. We don't know who he is though. The identity of Luke's addressee remains a mystery. All we can know from this is that he is some person of high stature because Luke calls him "most excellent Theophilus". *Kratiste* in the Greek, which is a title that you would use for Royalty, or a governor, or some kind of figure who holds an office of some prestige or esteem, and Luke addresses him in that way. Maybe he was the patron who paid for the book. In ancient times as well as in modern times, writers need money to get time to write, so people would frequently subsidize their writing through a gift of financial assistance and then the author would compose the book and dedicate it to the person who had assisted him financially in parchment, in ink, and also just the time to compose as massive a work as the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts are — two of the longest books in the New Testament.

Finally, notice that Luke insists that he's writing for Theophilus so that Theophilus can know the truth concerning the things of which he has been informed. Now again, the English is a little misleading here because the normal Greek word *aléthes* for "true", or *alétheia*, isn't used here. Here, Luke uses the word *asphaleia*, which actually means something more like "certainty". So he wants Theophilus to be certain about the things about which he has been informed, namely about Jesus of Nazareth; his life, his death, his resurrection. It's really interesting there that when Luke uses the word "inform", that last word, "about which you have been

informed”, the Greek word there is *katēcheō*, from which we get the English word “catechesis”; it literally means “to resound in the ears”, like to “echo in the ears” of someone. So when we catechize, we inform them about the truth of the faith, and we don’t make stuff up, we echo what the Church has said. We echo what the Apostles have said. At least that is what we’re supposed to do when we catechize. So you can actually translate this, “that you may know the certainty of the things of which you had been catechized.” That is kind of an interesting, different translation; it gives a little different connotation. But that’s what Luke’s doing. In any case, it’s absolutely clear that Luke sees himself as a Greco- Roman historian. He’s writing a historical biography of Jesus and he wants his reader to know that it’s accurate, eye witness testimony based, truthful, and that it can give his reader certainty, that the things he’s about to say happened, actually happened. Alright, so that’s the beginning of the gospel.

Fast forward now to Luke 4 and the lectionary picks up with the first public speech of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, which is his sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth. There are several elements of this passage that are important to underscore as well. First, just Jesus’ custom of going into the synagogue. I’ve said it before (a million times), but I’ll say it again: Jesus was a Jew, and he followed the customs and the laws of the Jewish people, and one of those Jewish laws, going back to the 10 commandments, was to rest on the 7th day, on the Sabbath day, which is Saturday, not Sunday. And by the time of the 1st century A.D., Sabbath rest had also developed into Sabbath worship, especially by going to your local synagogue and hearing the word of God read and preached upon, explained, and then, probably, they also sang some psalms as well, that kind of thing. It’s important here to note that a synagogue is different from a temple. There’s only one temple in Judaism at the time of Jesus. The temple is in Jerusalem. You go to the temple three times a year to sacrifice on Passover, Pentecost, and the Day of Atonement; you don’t go to the temple every week because you’d have to be travelling to the city of Jerusalem over and over and over again, and not everybody lives in Jerusalem. So by the time of Jesus, there grew up synagogues, which in Greek, a *synagōgē* means, literally, “a gathering place” or “a gathering together”. *Agó* means “to lead”, *sun* means “with”, so to lead everyone together, to gather them together so that they can hear the scriptures and pray, and maybe sing some psalms, and hear teaching as well.

So, whereas the temple — this is really important — was run by priests, who are part of the tribe of Levi, sons of Aaron, ordained to offer sacrifice, the synagogue was largely a lay movement. You didn't have to be a priest to read the Scripture in the synagogue. You didn't have to be a priest to preach in the synagogue, because there isn't any sacrifice involved in synagogue worship. All there is is doxology (praise of God), scripture reading and preaching. That's really important because Jesus is a Jewish layman; he is not a priest according to the old covenant. He is not a member of the tribe of Aaron, he's a member of the tribe of Judah, he's a descendant of David, and so when he goes into the synagogue — we often don't think about this — they don't hand him the book of Isaiah to read because he's the ordained priest, he's just a layman.

Now he's regarded as a Rabbi, which means a teacher of the law, so he's obviously gotten some esteem and some respect. So they hand the scroll over to him, but it's in that context that he takes the scroll on that Saturday, on that Sabbath, and he reads it aloud and then after he reads it, he sits down and everyone expects to hear a sermon now, a homily, because that's what Rabbi's would do. Another little side note, this is why Jesus is going to get into conflict with the Pharisees so much in the gospels. Have you ever wondered why he's always bumping heads with the Pharisees? It's not because the Pharisees were priests. They weren't priests either; they were laymen who mastered the scriptures and who studied the traditions of the fathers and they ran the show in the synagogues. So if Jesus' custom was to go about preaching in the synagogues, the first people he's going to come into conflict with aren't the priests in the temple of Jerusalem, it's the Pharisees, the lay people in the synagogues who were used to preaching and teaching tradition of the fathers, then Jesus steps in and he blows them all out of the water. They're all like, "wow, we've never heard anybody like this guy! He teaches like someone with authority, and not like the scribes and the Pharisees", who just cite other authorities. Kind of like modern scholars do with footnotes; we just cite other people to justify our ideas. Alright, it's okay, I love footnotes so I'm not going to be apologetic here.

Alright, that's a lot of background, but I want to try to bring it to life for you. He's in the synagogue, he's there, he's a layman, he's a native, he's a local boy, but he's been going about preaching and teaching so they give him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and he gets to read the passage. Now, another element about this that you might miss is the fact that this is what we would call "the second reading". In the

Jewish synagogue, there's a system of two readings: *Torah* and *Haftarah*. *Torah* is always a passage from the five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. That's the first reading in the Jewish synagogue. The second reading is called *haftarah* and it's some reading from another part of the bible, usually one of the prophets. So it's "law" and "prophets", that's how the synagogue readings work, 1st and 2nd reading. What happens here is Jesus is given the 2nd reading to do and it's, of course, from the prophets. In this case it's from Isaiah, and so he stands up — the RSV says he takes the book, but there weren't books at that point, it was a scroll — he opens the scroll to the passage where Isaiah says, "the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor", so on and so forth.

Now, this is a quotation from Isaiah 61:1-2. It's a very important passage, because it's one of the few passages in Isaiah that explicitly uses the language of "Messiah" or "Anointing", "Anointed One." There's this mysterious figure that God has put his spirit upon and then it says he has "anointed me" to go out and preach good news to the poor. Now in Greek the word for anointed is *chriō*, we get the word christen from that, or anointing. So someone's christening is their anointing. Jesus here is taking the words of the prophet Isaiah and applying them to himself. So Isaiah is describing this figure who is anointed by the Spirit, and Jesus is going to say, that's me, "this is being fulfilled in your hearing." And it also says that this mysterious anointed one, this Messiah, has a mission; he's going to proclaim good news to the poor, he's going to proclaim release to the captives, and he's going to proclaim the "Year of Deliverance" or "The Acceptable Year of the Lord". I think most of us have some sense of what the good news is, the good news of salvation, the good news of deliverance, but, at least for me, for years, when I read that verse "proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord", I didn't know what it meant. I didn't have any clue. What is "the acceptable year"? Is it like this year God's like, "it's going to be a really good year, it's going to be an acceptable year," like it was his new year's resolution or something. No. That's a technical term for the Jubilee year.

If you go back to the book of Leviticus 25, what God says there is, at the end of a seven times seven year cycle, so you have 49 years — like the Sabbath times the Sabbath — after 49 years, the 50th year will be a Jubilee year. It's going to be a Jubilee year because in that year all debts are forgiven, all slaves are set free, and any land that has been appropriated, that used to belong to a family but they lost it

through debt, will be returned to the original owners. Now, just imagine if you lived in a Jubilee year and all your student debt, or all your house debt, or all your car debt, or all your credit card debt, whatever debt that you might have that's weighing over your head, imagine if it was all gone, just like that in the Jubilee year. Now that would be an acceptable year, right? It would be a year of joy, a year of deliverance, and so what Jesus is saying here is that, or what Isaiah is saying, is that when the Messiah comes, his coming is somehow going to be coordinated with, conjoined with, a great Jubilee year. A great year of release, when all debts will be forgiven, and people will be set free from bondage; which, if you've been in debt, you'll know, it is bondage. It is a burden, and to be freed from it is a source of great joy.

Okay, so what? The rub really comes when after saying these things Jesus sits down and everyone in the synagogue looks at him and waits for him to start preaching. Which, by the way, it's customary in our time for homilists to preach standing, but in Jesus' day it was the opposite. If you were going to preach you would sit down, and most scholars think that what you would do is you would sit in the chair of Moses in the synagogue — we know that they had these. The chair of Moses was a specific chair, it's like a presider's chair, in a synagogue, and a Pharisee or a scribe would sit on the seat of Moses and they would teach from the Torah from the seat of Moses as a kind of symbol of the authority of Moses. So it's funny that we do the opposite; we think that if a person has authority and that they're going to teach, they need to stand up. In Jesus' day it was the opposite, if you were going to teach with authority you sat down, which I like, because then you don't get as tired, but that's neither here nor there.

Okay, so, while they're waiting for his homily, what does he say? The one thing that no one had ever said before: Today, in your hearing, this scripture, about the Messiah, and the Jubilee, that we just heard, is fulfilled. So what's Jesus doing? He's taking the words of the prophets and he's applying them to himself. He's revealing for the first time publicly, in a homily, that he himself is the Messiah, and that the time of the Messiah is now.

Okay, we'll see next week what the implications of that and what the aftermath of that declaration is. For now, let's go back to the Old Testament. So the first reading for today is from the book of Nehemiah, and in this case the Church has chosen to

give us a reading from the Old Testament which parallels the New Testament not in the sense of typology, but in the sense of liturgical context. Nehemiah 8 is a lengthy description of the proclamation of scripture to the Jews after they return from the Babylonian exile. So Ezra, who's going to be the central figure in the text, is a priest and a leader of the Jewish people after they came back from the Babylonian exile. He's usually dated to the 5th century B.C., and so what he's trying to do is restore and rejuvenate the practice of Judaism within Jerusalem and Judah, by bringing the people back to the Word of God, and then they're going to rebuild the temple, and reconstitute sacrifices and that kind of stuff. In that context, it describes what their worship service was like. So let's look at that together. Nehemiah 8:2-4 says this:

And Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. And 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. And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden pulpit which they had made for the purpose. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people; and when he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God; and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands; and they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. And they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. 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. Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to him 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."

Okay, lots going on there that we could talk about here. For our purposes, I just want to highlight a few parallels between the description of the liturgy here and our own experience of the Liturgy of the Word at mass — that's at least what hits me.

So first point, notice, when they read from the Torah, that means the Law of Moses, when Ezra reads from the Law of Moses, what do all the people do? They all stand up as a way of honoring the law of God. That's the first point.

Secondly, notice, it's a really long reading. It says he reads from morning until midday. So if you think the readings are long at mass, like on Palm Sunday when we read the whole passion, that's nothing compared to what Nehemiah's doing with the people. Now, why is it so long? That wouldn't be the ordinary reading for a synagogue service at the time of Jesus. By the time of Jesus, the synagogue service has split up the readings. What's going on here is that Nehemiah is reintroducing the law to the people after the exile, many of whom had forgotten it or had never heard it. That's why they start to weep, because when he starts to read the commandments, and the punishments that come from those commandments — like in Deuteronomy 27-28 — the people realize they've not been keeping the law, and that the reason they've been in exile is because of their sin. So they start to weep and mourn as they hear the word of God. Would that today that more people wept when we heard the word of God, that it would move us to sorrow and repentance for our sins. That's what's going on here with the word of God.

A third thing that's interesting about it is, notice — you hear Christians say this sometimes and it drives me crazy — sometimes people say that in ancient Judaism, women were excluded from the worship assembly, it was just men. That's not true! Notice, in Nehemiah 8, this is Old Testament, not New Testament, who's present at the worship assembly? It's men, women and even children, although it does say that it was the children who were old enough to understand. So I guess they put the babies in like an ancient Israelite cry room or something like that, I don't know where the babies were. But notice, it's a congregation that's reflective of all of the people. Everyone who's reached the age of reason: men, women, and children. Notice also that the people respond to the reading in kind of a set formulae: "Amen, Amen" and then they kneel down and they stand up. Lots of times people have the same questions about us Catholics, "Why do we do this stuff? Why do we have this kind of ritualized formulae"? Well, that's part of the worship, of not just the Old Testament, but Jesus himself would have followed those kind of patterns of worship" in the synagogues in the 1st century A.D.

And then finally, it's fascinating to me that if you look at this worship service in Nehemiah 8, there are two key parts. There's the "Liturgy of the Word", where they read the scripture and then it's expounded, and notice that in this case, it's the Levites who kind of explain the scripture to the people. Some scholars actually think that they have to translate it and explain it, because the Torah would have been in Hebrew and after the Babylonian exile, many of the people would have only spoken Aramaic. There is some debate about that, so that's not a certain point, but it would make sense if that's the meaning of the text here.

So you have the "Liturgy of the Word", but then you also have the "Liturgy of the Banquet", because after the word is read and preached and explained, then, what do they do? They eat and they drink in a sacrificial feast that involves wine. Fascinating, right? Liturgy of the Word, Liturgy of the Banquet; and with that banquet, they even bring some to the poor. Notice, "bring those who have nothing prepared" So there's this concern for almsgiving, that the food of the feast not just be brought to those who were able to attend, but to anyone who couldn't attend, that they would be fed as well. You can just kind of see some beautiful parallels between that and the mass today, where Holy Communion is not just reserved for those can make it to mass, but that it's brought to the sick as well, and to the homebound.

Alright, so that's the Old and New Testament readings for today. The psalm today is really just a beautiful hymn of praise to the Torah as the law of God, as being perfect and trustworthy and right and pure and holy and delightful, and that's the bridge between the old and the new, because what's happening in the old is that the Law of God is being proclaimed, and in the new, it is being fulfilled in the person and the mission of Jesus Christ.

Okay, with that said, I just want to close with one quote from the living tradition. This is from Origen of Alexandria, one of the early church fathers in the 3rd century A.D., and he has a commentary on Luke where he talks about the line in Luke's gospel, it says that, "every eye was attentive to Jesus", and I think he has a beautiful reflection on that so I'll read from that.

"Every eye in the synagogue was fixed upon him." Here too in this synagogue, that is in this present assembly, you can at this very moment fix your eyes upon your Savior if you wish. Whenever you direct your inward gaze toward wisdom and truth and the contemplation of God's only Son,

then your eyes are fixed upon Jesus. Blessed was that congregation of which the gospel says, “All eyes in the synagogue were fixed upon him!” How I long for our own assembly to deserve the same testimony; for all of you, catechumens as well as the faithful, men, women, children, to have your eyes, not those of the body but of the soul, turned toward Jesus! When you look at Jesus your own faces will become radiant with his reflected glory...²

So in other words, what Origen is saying there is that every single mass, every single worship service, every single Eucharistic celebration, should be like a little recapitulation of the transfiguration. When the disciples saw the glory of Jesus, when they fixed their eyes on Jesus and his glory was reflected in them, manifested, revealed to them, so too we, when we encounter Jesus in the Word, if the inward gaze of our mind and our heart is attentive to the word that’s being proclaimed, we too should then imbibe that word, take that word, and then reflect it to others; if we’re being attentive. But, so often times, it’s the case that, at least in my experience, I notice sometimes in my own life, and also with Catholics at large, I’ve heard Catholics say things to the effect that, “Let’s get done with this Liturgy of the Word so that we can get to the real deal, which is the Eucharist, right? I came here to receive Jesus in Holy Communion.” Well, slow down! First of all, that’s utter disregard for the fact that the scripture is the inspired word of God. But secondly, it fails to recognize that Christ doesn’t just come to us in the Eucharist, he comes to us in his Word. It’s Christ speaking to us in the Word. So to the extent that we failed to be attentive to him in the Liturgy of the Word, we are failing to prepare ourselves to receive him in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. So let us all keep in mind the words of St. Luke’s gospel, and let’s keep the eyes of our hearts “fixed on Jesus” in the Liturgy.

² Origen, *Homilies the Gospel of Luke*, 32.2-6; trans. E. Barnecutt, p. 75

