

Third Sunday after Epiphany, January 26, 2025
HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD

Prayer

Lord, we thank you that you have both given us your revealed word and that we know you as the Word incarnate.

AMEN

Reading What?

In today's Old Testament lesson, Nehemiah – The Governor – records the reading of the Book of the Law by Ezra – The Priest. This book, Torah (תּוֹרָה) in Hebrew, is what the Israelites called the first five books in our Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

While it's called the Book of the Law, it not only contains God's Law but His Gospel as well. Both in Exodus 20 and in Deuteronomy 5 we have the summary of God's law, the ten commandments. Many of us memorized them as part of the confirmation process, along with Luther's explanation as found in the *Small Catechism*.

While the text does not specify the day the reading took place, the people most likely doing their best to keep the Third Commandment:

You shall sanctify the holy day.

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Which Luther explains this way:

We should fear and love God that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it.

But they, like Christians today, were unable to keep even one of the commandments, let alone all of them. As we confessed earlier in the service,

that we have sinned in thought, word, and deed, and that we cannot free ourselves from our sinful condition.

and the Israelites response to their inability to meet the demands of the law, as described in verse 9, was weeping.

But the Book of the Law not only contains God's Law, but His Gospel, God's promise of what He will do FOR YOU through Jesus, as well. Here are three well-known promises from those five books.

TO ADAM & EVE: (GEN 3:15) *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.*

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TO ABRAHM: (GEN 12:1-3) *Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

TO ALL THOSE WHO SINNED (NUM 31:6-9) *Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us." So, Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." So, Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.*

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Faith Comes from Hearing

Looking at verses 3 through 8, the pattern of activity should seem familiar to you. The people gathered together – men, women, and children - from early morning until noon, on what was presumably the Sabbath day. The priest stood before them on a raised platform and read from the Book of the Law. The people responded with an “AMEN” and then the priests explained what was being read and helped the people understand each passage.

Sounds not unlike what we’ve been doing this morning in what we’ve titled **Service of the Word** – reading, response, and preaching.

You may ask why this is so critical.

Because of the distinction between hearing and seeing!

On the positive side, scripture is clear about the benefits of hearing God’s word (Rom 10:14-17):

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*How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" **So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.***

We are also called to believe through **faith** things that we cannot see, both by the writer of Hebrews (Heb 11:1)

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

And our Lord, as recorded by St. John (John 20:29)

Jesus said to [Thomas], "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

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In fact, scripture goes so far as to say that those don't believe can see miraculous signs and wonders but still won't be convinced. This isn't a new idea; it was part of Isaiah's call, which was quoted by Jesus in the New Testament (Isaiah 6:8-10):

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me." And he said, "Go, and say to this people:

"Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

Why is this true? CS Lewis has a great explanation for why we disbelieve what we see:

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I have known only one person in my life who claimed to have seen a ghost. It was a woman; and the interesting thing is that she disbelieved in the immortality of the soul before seeing the ghost and still disbelieves after having seen it. She thinks it was a hallucination. In other words, **seeing is not believing**. This is the first thing to get clear in talking about miracles. Whatever experiences we may have, **we shall not regard them as miraculous if we already hold a philosophy which excludes the supernatural.** (*C.S. Lewis Essay Collection and Other Short Stories*, 107)

And this disbelief in the unseen world is more prevalent in our world today than ever before – where we will only believe in what we can observe, explain, and understand.

Joy of the Lord

The last verse of the reading, verse 10, Nehemiah tells his listeners, both then and now, us to celebrate, to share our good fortune, and to focus on God's joy over us.

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While we won't celebrate the Lord's supper today, when I dismiss a table, I say to "depart in peace and joy." I add those two words – and joy – to remind both myself and you that God has indeed served us and that our response to the free forgiveness of sins in the supper should be joy. In contrast, earlier in my ministry, I added the words "and serve the Lord," which at some point I realized was confusion of Law and Gospel, telling you **to do something** when God has already done it all **for you**.

As always, it is indeed my prayer for you that these words spoken by me and heard by you would be God's Word of Good News and that they would bring forth faith and trust in the promises that God so freely offers to all through the person and work of Jesus His Son.

AMEN