

The Proclamation (Neh 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Cor. 12:12-31a; Lk 4:14-21)

by John Stendahl

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Majestic now Christ stands and proclaims the prophet's words fulfilled. Well, that's not quite accurate. He does read the words standing up, but then in good rabbinic fashion he sits down to teach. Still, there is majesty to be imagined in that sitting and in the brief sentence pronounced to the expectant hearers: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He sits, but the seat of his teaching is a kind of throne. Just a hometown boy visiting his childhood synagogue, perhaps, but almost regal in his authority.

It was Ezra who stood for so long before the audience of the people, reading the book of God's law to them from early morning until midday. On that day too there was something majestic, an authority at work. "The ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law."

Ezra himself was not the authority, of course, but the book, the law now reclaimed and remembered, the words given to Israel through Moses. The majesty and glory is in the book. When Ezra opens it in the sight of the people, they all stand up.

But not only the book. Ezra blesses YHWH, the divine name, the great God, and they lift up their hands and cry "Amen, Amen." And then they bow their heads to worship this God, their faces to the ground. Then comes reading and interpretation, that the people might understand. They weep at hearing the law of God, and Ezra, Nehemiah and all the priestly teachers exhort them not to grieve but to go and feast, for this day is holy. The great meal, spread out among the people, is to be shared by all, with portions sent to those who have none.

The passage in Nehemiah describes a great liturgy, a public act whereby the whole nation is reconstituted and rededicated by the covenant and the presence of God. They greet, they bless, they worship, they listen. They are bidden to turn their tears to joy and to eat and drink in one vast and scattered banquet. The Torah makes them a people again. "This day," says Nehemiah, "is holy to our Lord."

We have reason to be uncomfortable with great national liturgies: we have seen them used by the ideologists of this century. We know they can support violence and oppression. We have seen rallies where sense is sacrificed to fervor and crowds are intoxicated with their own unanimity. We know how easy it is to mobilize resentment and hatred in a large group. But we have also seen public ceremonies of sorrow, repentance and rededication, and there have been times in great gatherings when our spirits have rightly lifted to hear of a dream, a vision worth living or even dying for.

For the most part, however, we work not with large gatherings and national liturgies, but in countless local communities. Like that synagogue in Nazareth. Is it possible that the same kind of authority can be heard there, the same work be done? Can the world and nation there be reimagined? Can our common life be consecrated?

Jesus proclaims that the words of the prophet are not about some distant future, nor even about the near millennium. The jubilee year, the good news for the poor, the release of captives, the recovered vision, the liberation of the oppressed: these are proclaimed now. The emancipation proclamation is pronounced here, this day.

Of course, a proclamation doesn't always achieve what it declares. Moreover, there is an ambiguity in Jesus' words: is "today" the actual day of freedom, or is it the day when the anointed proclaimer of that future appears? The latter, more modest interpretation would seem safer easier to credit. Certainly there is still captivity, oppression, blindness and poverty; the greater part of the prophecy's promise lies unfulfilled.

Yet to call this a safer interpretation misses the point. To believe the proclaimer, to hear authority in Jesus' claim, means believing that this proposed future is at hand. The present leans into it and it has begun. Such proclamation is not an abstracted statement of fact, but a reality declared to reshape reality now. Remember Paul's bold words in 1 Corinthians: "God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are."

When the Emancipation Proclamation was issued in the midst of the Civil War, the slaves who lived within the realm of the Confederacy remained in bondage. Many did not know about the proclamation when it went into effect. Its authority was denied and nullified by local and regional power. Yet Lincoln, in both his words and his claim to authority over the whole of the split and rebellious Union, contended that the proclamation was nonetheless true and real. And so this flawed and partial emancipation became the herald of a fuller freedom, a fulfillment yet unreachd.

In form and action, our liturgies are like the one that Ezra led. We bless and worship and listen and think. In some places we even stand up to honor the book and the word it brings to us. We acknowledge grief and are bidden to joy; we eat and drink, and provide some portion for the needy. Are these little gatherings, then, for all that seems domestic and intimate in them, also occasions of public proclamation, gatherings where -- as in Nazareth --

Jesus speaks with true authority? Do they imagine and enact the shape of a future that claims our obedience? Do we believe in such a way that we are reknit as a body, members of one another, a commonwealth and not just people for ourselves? Are the words fulfilled in our hearing?

This Sunday I will stand and declare it to be so.

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