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Nehemiah 8: 1 – 3, 5 – 6, 8 – 10
1 Corinthians 12: 12 – 31APsalm 19
Luke 4: 14 – 21

“Now you are the Body of Christ, and individually, members of it.”

At first hearing, today’s lessons may seem to have little that ties them together. In Nehemiah, we hear Ezra reading from the book of Moses and describing the cultic practices of the Hebrews, so that they can reinstate the covenant with Yahweh, God, now that the people of Israel have returned from the Babylonian captivity. The psalm seems to have two rather distinct and yet related parts. The first part emphasizes that all of creation manifests God’s glory, articulated not in words but in beauty and majesty which fill the whole expansive realm of creation. The second part of the psalm, works its way down to the unarticulated expression of the human heart in praising God. With Paul, we are reminded that, upon baptism, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we become part of something much larger: the Body of Christ. And Luke writes about Jesus’ first homily in front of his family and friends in Nazareth in which he has the audacity to tell the people gathered that, in him, centuries of prophecy are being fulfilled in front of their very eyes.

It seems as though these lessons are all sign posts pointing in different directions, unless we hear them as answering two questions: 1) Where do we find God? And 2) How is God made manifest in us, the Church? Where do we find God? Today’s lessons tell us that we find God in Holy Scripture, in our worship practices and in creation. We find God when we praise God for the marvelous things God has done for us. We find God when we see God working in and through each other as we work together. And we find God when we minister to those in need – when we bring good news to the poor, when we release captives from the things that bind and oppress them, when we feed the hungry and heal the sick.

God is made manifest in us when we are the Body of Christ, the Church. We are the Church when we come together in worship and learn anew whose we are again. We are the Church when we sing God’s praises. We are the Church when we work together with our separate gifts to be the Body of Christ. We are the Church when we remember that we, just like Jesus, have already been anointed with the Holy Spirit at our baptism. And we are the Church when we allow the Spirit of God to lead us in teaching and proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ by ministering in the community and in the world. Whenever we do any of these things, we are an epiphany. We help make God manifest by revealing God as present and active in this world through the Body of Christ.

In telling us about this very special rededication ceremony, Nehemiah lets us know a couple of things. First, the ceremony doesn’t take place in the Temple, but rather out in the square in front of one of the gates. Basically, in the market place. On the courthouse square. In the mall. In the middle of the union building on campus. And *everyone* is there – men, women and children, not simply the august clergy, the royal priesthood, but everyone. Which tells us that we are the people of God out in the world – the marketplace – as much as, or perhaps more than, when we are here in this building. And, we are ALL the people of God: male and female, old and young, clergy and lay. So where is God? God is present everywhere FOR us, and everywhere THROUGH us. How are we to be the Church? We are to

make God manifest in the world, not just within the sacred precincts of these walls, and each of us is empowered and equipped to do that.

A second thing that Nehemiah points out is that Ezra reads the text, but then the Levites, the priestly class, run around through the crowd explaining what Ezra has just read, and answering questions. This is because Ezra is reading the Scripture in Hebrew, and the people, who have been in exile, away from the Temple and away from the practice of their faith for two or three generations, no longer understand their own language or traditions. So the Levites run around translating it into Aramaic, the language that the people now use. Some of the references in the Scripture probably have to be interpreted because they have lost their meaning to these people. So from Nehemiah, we learn that Scripture is to be both read and taught. It is not enough to just hold the Bible, or let the family Bible sit on the book shelf, collecting dust. It is not enough just to read the Bible publicly. The Bible must be discussed, taught, explained and reinterpreted for a new generation.

Psalm 19 is about seeking and finding God everywhere from the expansiveness of creation to the intimate crevices of our own hearts. It reiterates in a variety of ways that a life lived well, that is, in accordance with the word of God, is the thing to be most valued in life, and is, in fact what gives meaning to life. We make God manifest to the world when we live into the word of God.

We are one body in the one Spirit writes Paul. And we find God in the presence of that Spirit in one another. The Christ in me meets the Christ in thee. I can look at you and see God, even though I can't always perceive God when I look inside myself. Perhaps sometimes you can look at me and see God, even though you are having a hard time seeing God inside of you. And the really fantastic thing is that we each manifest God a little bit differently, because we are many individual members of the one body. God, working in and through you, looks different than God working in and through me. That is wonderful because it opens up possibilities for both of us that, apart, we might never experience. God can do things through your gifts and experiences, and God can do things through my gifts and experiences, and when we come together as one body, putting our gifts and experiences together to work for God, we can do so much more than we can apart. It is through using our individual and corporate gifts that we enable others to see God, alive and present in our worship and in this world.

In Luke, we find Jesus reading Holy Scripture to the people just as Ezra does. But this time, it's the home town boy coming back to read and to lead worship in front of his family, friends and neighbors. The passage that Jesus chooses is from the book of the prophet, Isaiah, it's a job description for all that Jesus' ministry will be about. After rolling up the scroll, Jesus astonishes everyone by announcing that the day this prophecy comes to fulfillment is now, right here. Now we don't know whether the folks listening to Jesus are positively or negatively astonished at this first hearing. Do they elbow each other and say, "Wow, I never expected so much from Joseph and Mary's boy!" Or perhaps they move restlessly, uncomfortably, saying, "Hrmph. I wonder who he thinks *he* is?!" (Stay tuned for next week's Gospel!)

Before all this happens, Luke makes a point of telling us that Jesus has returned to his hometown filled with the power of the Holy Spirit: the Spirit that hovered over him at his baptism by

John, the Spirit that allowed him to face down the temptations in the wilderness. So now, in the strength and guidance of that same Spirit, Jesus inaugurates his ministry. And those who have known him most of his life are astounded. What about us, those who feel we know Jesus so well because we have heard all these passages so many times? Is it possible for us to still be astounded by what we hear in Scripture? By what we experience in worship? The people gathered around Jesus on this day are not quite prepared for God to do a new thing. What about us? Where is God, and how is God made manifest in us, the Church? We make God manifest when we allow God to speak anew to us through Scripture and perhaps surprise us by doing something unexpected. And we make God manifest when we imitate Jesus and allow the Holy Spirit to strengthen us for the ministry to which God has called us.

So what's the take-home for today? What implications are there for us in today's lessons? We are challenged to develop our awareness and sense of celebration that God is here, right now. [On Being – interview with Br. David Stendahl Ross, "This day is wonderful. I've never seen one like it before."] To celebrate with enthusiasm (*en theos*) and joy that abiding, in-dwelling sense of the holy that enables us and all who worship with us to encounter God in ever new ways. To respond with fervor and excitement in our worship – even in solemn times such as Lent. To be energized and alert to the electric presence of God in this space.

Another implication for us is to be more intentional about our study of Scripture – who wrote it and when, and who was their intended audience, and how does it still speak to us today? Imagine our sanctuary packed with men and women and children, just like in front of the city gate with Ezra, or like in the synagogue with Jesus. Imagine us helping one another to find God through the Word. Imagine each one of us manifesting God to one another.

And then imagine us manifesting God ever more boldly in the streets and the world around us. Think back to what brought you or me to the faith, and perhaps to church, in the first place. Maybe it was advertising that piqued our interests to find something we were missing. Maybe it was the still, small voice of God nudging us. But most likely, it was someone. A parent or grandparent, maybe a child. A college roommate, a friend, or a neighbor who invited us to come and experience God through fellowship and worship. And we came because we saw something in them that we wanted – a light, a sense of peace, a steadfastness, a foundation on which to stand, a joy, a willingness to reach out to those in need, a hope, a courage, a faith in what is not seen. How do we become any of those for someone else?

So where is God? Right here. In each of us. In the word of God. In our worship. And out there. In the members of the Body of Christ outside these walls. How is God made manifest to us and to others? By us being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit to live out our baptismal call on a daily basis. By us, continually learning anew who we are and by our saying yes. YES! to God. +