

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Nehemiah = nee-huh-Mī-uh

Ezra = EZ-ruh

Ezra's actions follow a powerful trajectory, all centered around the proclamation of the law. Since this took place after the return of the Jews from exile, many of the people would be hearing it proclaimed aloud for the first time. This was an emotional and dramatic moment.

A shift takes place here; even before the reading of the book begins, Ezra blesses the Lord, and the people bow down and worship. Read this section slowly.
prostrated = PROS-tray-t*d

LECTIONARY #69

READING I Nehemiah 8:2–4a, 5–6, 8–10

A reading from the Book of Nehemiah

Ezra the priest brought the law before the **assembly**,
which consisted of **men, women**,
and those **children** old enough to **understand**.
Standing at one end of the open place that was before
the Water Gate,
he **read** out of the **book** from daybreak till midday,
in the presence of the **men, the women**,
and those **children** old enough to **understand**;
and **all the people** listened **attentively** to the **book** of the law.
Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform
that had been made for the occasion.
He **opened** the **scroll**
so that **all the people** might see it
—for he was standing higher up than any of the people—;
and, as he **opened** it, **all the people rose**.
Ezra **blessed** the **LORD**, the great **God**,
and **all the people**, their hands raised **high**, answered,
“**Amen, amen!**”
Then they bowed down and prostrated themselves
before the **LORD**,
their faces to the **ground**.

READING I

Among the lesser-known books of the Old Testament are the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which are frequently read together. While it is unclear if Ezra and Nehemiah had the same or different authors, it is likely that they appeared in their present form in the late fourth century BC, when Judah was a remote province in the Persian Empire. The books are named after their protagonists: Ezra, the priest-scribe responsible for rebuilding the religious identity of Judah after the exile in Babylon, and Nehemiah, an official from the Persian court who was commis-

sioned to oversee the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. Although Ezra and Nehemiah appear in both books, the books themselves often present conflicting information, making the accurate dating of events and even the persons involved rather sketchy.

Drawn from Nehemiah 8, today's reading describes how Ezra (in Nehemiah's presence) engages in his most important public task: to conduct an extended public reading of the Torah of Moses (the book of the law) and to lead the people in a renewal of the Mosaic covenant. What is presumed

but left unsaid is the situation in which the people find themselves. Having returned from exile in Babylon, the returnees are confronted with a destroyed Jerusalem and its temple, the devastation of their royal family, and the loss of their covenant identity. Indeed, the loss of their national identity is so extreme that they no longer speak Hebrew, their native language. Thus, Ezra's task is an arduous one. Not only must he reacquaint the people with their own tradition—the book of the law—but he and the Levites need to translate and interpret the text so that the people can understand.

Give some stress to this line, in which the reading of the book is accompanied by explanation, thereby helping the hearers grow in understanding.

Levites = LEE-vitz

The people are caught off guard by what they hear. Make sure that the assembly hears this part of the story. Emphasize the rich fare and the sharing, as well as the reason for this response, which is the holiness and joy of the Lord.

For meditation and context:

Ezra read **plainly** from the **book** of the **law** of **God**,
interpreting it so that all could **understand** what was read.
 Then Nehemiah, that is, His Excellency, and Ezra
 the priest-scribe
 and the Levites who were instructing the people
 said to all the people:
"Today is holy to the LORD your God.
Do not be sad, and do not weep" —
 for all the people were **weeping** as they heard the words
 of the law.
 He said further: **"Go, eat rich foods and drink sweet drinks,**
and allot portions to those who had nothing prepared;
for today is holy to our LORD.
Do not be saddened this day,
for rejoicing in the LORD must be your strength!"

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 15 (see John 6:63c)

R. Your words, Lord, are Spirit and life.

The law of the LORD is perfect,
 refreshing the soul;
 the decree of the LORD is trustworthy,
 giving wisdom to the simple.

The fear of the LORD is pure,
 enduring forever;
 the ordinances of the LORD are true,
 all of them just.

The precepts of the LORD are right,
 rejoicing the heart;
 the command of the LORD is clear,
 enlightening the eye.

Let the words of my mouth and the thought
 of my heart
 find favor before you,
 O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

The transformative nature of the moment is revealed in the concluding lines of the reading. We read that the people weep at what they hear. In response to this, they are told that they should not weep on this holy day but should feast, "for rejoicing in the LORD must be your strength!" The overall message of Ezra-Nehemiah explains that the disaster of the exile was a direct result of the people's lack of faithfulness to the Torah. It is only in returning to a life of keeping God's law that they will spare themselves from future destruction.

READING II

Paul's two letters to the Corinthians were written to a community that was dynamic, talented, vibrant, and deeply divided. Paul's first letter includes a series of rhetorical arguments that strive to convince the members of the community that they can celebrate their diverse talents and gifts even as they celebrate their unity in Christ and with one another as members of the Church, the Body of Christ.

In today's reading, Paul takes up the popular Hellenistic image of the body to make his point. Following his exposition on

the many gifts that the Spirit showers upon the members of the community (see last week's second reading), Paul uses the image of the body to emphasize that the gifts are nothing apart from the unity of the body. Although Paul's use of the image of the body was common among ancient Greek and Roman rhetoricians, he brings unique interpretations to the image. First, he distinguishes between the natural body and the Body of Christ. It is from nature that the human body is one with its many diverse parts. In contrast, it is from God, and particularly the Spirit, that the Body of

Corinthians = kohr-IN-thee-uhnz

Keep in mind these major sections: our identity as one body, belonging in the body, needs of the body for completeness, concern of the parts for one another, and lastly, a direct appeal to the identity of the community at Corinth.

Accentuate the themes of "many" and "one."

The rest of this reading may look repetitive, but there are important differences for you to highlight in your proclamation. The theme of belonging speaks to community members who may feel like they're not important.

Paul points out that belonging is for the benefit of all, as the entire community needs all of its members.

Christ is one even though it is composed of Jews, Greeks, slaves, and free persons, all of whom are endowed with a variety of gifts. Second, this amazing diversity merging into unity comes, not through natural and earthly means, but rather through the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist, which transform and unite the diverse individuals into one body. Third, while some of his contemporary rhetoricians used the image of the body to justify the subordination of some parts to other parts, Paul insists that each part has a dignified role to play for the common good of all. Not only is

READING II 1 Corinthians 12:12–30

A reading from the first Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians

[Brothers and sisters:

As a **body** is **one** though it has **many** parts,
and **all** the parts of the body, though **many**, are **one** body,
so also **Christ**.

For in **one Spirit** we were all baptized into **one body**,
whether **Jews** or **Greeks**, **slaves** or **free** persons,
and we were all given to drink of **one Spirit**.

Now the body is not a **single** part, but **many**.]

If a **foot** should say,

"Because I am not a **hand** I do not **belong** to the body,"
it does not for this reason belong any **less** to the body.

Or if an **ear** should say,

"Because I am not an **eye** I do not **belong** to the body,"
it does not for this reason belong any **less** to the body.

If the whole body were an eye, **where would** the hearing be?

If the whole body were hearing, **where would** the sense
of smell be?

But as it is, **God placed the parts**,

each one of them, in the body as **he** intended.

If they were all one part, **where would** the body be?

But as it is, there are **many** parts, yet **one** body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I do not **need** you,"
nor **again** the head to the feet, "I do not **need** you."

Indeed, the parts of the body that seem to be **weaker**
are all the more **necessary**,

and those parts of the body that we consider **less** honorable
we surround with **greater** honor,

and our **less** presentable parts are treated with
greater propriety,

whereas our **more** presentable parts do not need this.

it impossible for the parts to say that they do not need each other, but God has so constructed them that the suffering of one part means that all suffer, and the honoring of one part leads to joy for all. In this way, there is no place for division, for all have an equally significant role to play for the good of the body.

In conclusion, even when we turn to the lists of charisms that are found at the end of the reading, the emphasis is not on rank or importance but rather on service to the body. When these lists are combined with an earlier list (1 Corinthians 12:8–10),

there is a total of thirteen gifts on display. Still, even this combined list fails to encompass the fullness of the Spirit's gifts. For example, there is no mention of those who baptize, those who organize the community's Eucharistic celebration, or those who oversee the collection. Clearly, there is a multitude of gifts. For the Corinthian community riven by division, Paul's letter is a vital course correction.

GOSPEL

In the political climate of imperial Rome, a merger of religion and politics justified the empire's

Emphasize the words of mutual suffering and joy.

Shift your tone from that of instruction to that of direct address. Paul turns his attention in a loving but firm way to the community members themselves, just as his words speak to us today.

Context, order, and accuracy are important to Luke, and his attention to detail reassures his audience (and us) that he offers a truthful account. Read with confidence.

Practice this lengthy first sentence by mentally dividing it into its two halves, balanced on the fulcrum of "I too have decided."

Theophilus = thee-AWF-uh-luhs

forced and violent conquest of other nations by appealing to the glory of Rome and the Roman gods. Any rival religious tradition that tried to offer a different narrative would face a seemingly impossible task. Yet it is just such a course corrective/counter narrative that Luke undertakes in today's Gospel.

The evangelist Luke, writing around AD 85 for a primarily Gentile Christian audience, faced the challenge of assisting his Christian community to understand how Jesus, his ministry, and his message of the kingdom could rival Caesar and his empire.

But **God** has so **constructed** the **body**

as to give **greater** honor to a part that is **without** it,
so that there may be **no** division in the body,
but that the parts may have the **same** concern
for one another.

If **one part** suffers, **all the parts** suffer with it;
if one part is **honored**, **all the parts** share its joy.

Now [**you are Christ's body**, and individually **parts** of it.]

Some people God has designated in the church
to be, first, **apostles**; second, **prophets**; third, **teachers**;
then, **mighty deeds**;
then gifts of **healing**, **assistance**, **administration**,
and varieties of **tongues**.

Are **all** apostles? Are **all** prophets? Are **all** teachers?
Do all work **mighty deeds**? Do all have gifts of **healing**?
Do all speak in **tongues**? Do all **interpret**?

[Shorter: 1 Corinthians 12:12–14, 27 (see brackets)]

GOSPEL Luke 1:1–4, 4:14–21

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke

Since many have undertaken to compile a **narrative**
of the events
that have been fulfilled among us,
just as those who were **eyewitnesses** from the **beginning**
and ministers of the **word** have handed them **down** to us,
I too have decided,
after investigating everything accurately **anew**,
to write it down in an **orderly sequence** for you,
most excellent Theophilus,
so that you may realize the **certainty** of the **teachings**
you have received. >>

Beginning the Gospel with a formal historical prologue, Luke assures his reader, Theophilus (who may have been a financial donor), that this account is based on written sources, eyewitness accounts, and careful research, and is consequently superior to earlier and less reliable accounts. In particular, Luke strives to portray the "events that have been fulfilled among us" as the culminating moment in Israel's longing for the messianic age.

In his account of Jesus' birth (2:11), Luke alone recalled the message of the angel to the shepherds that "today in the

city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord." This is a bold message, for these were titles that Caesar claimed for himself. Still, in the second part of today's reading (4:14–21), Luke demonstrates that Jesus and his mission are strikingly different from those of Caesar and his empire. In recalling the words of the prophet Isaiah, Jesus claims that he has been anointed by the Spirit. He declares that his role is to proclaim the message of the kingdom and to save the captives from captivity, the blind from blindness, and the oppressed from oppression. As the Gospel

Pause before this second section to call attention to the shift; the assembly is about to hear Jesus' entrance into the narrative. Stress the verbs in this section of the reading.

Pause briefly after the word "written." The shift here is to Isaiah's words of prophecy, and the assembly should hear in your proclamation that Jesus is reading aloud about himself.

Slow down here to build the tension. Say Jesus' words with understated power.

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the **Spirit**, and **news** of him spread throughout the whole region. He **taught** in their synagogues and was **praised** by all.

He came to **Nazareth**, where he had **grown up**, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the **sabbath day**.

He **stood up** to read and was **handed** a scroll of the prophet **Isaiah**.

He **unrolled** the scroll and found the passage where it was written:

*The **Spirit** of the **Lord** is **upon** me,*

*because he has **anointed** me*

*to bring **glad** tidings to the **poor**.*

*He has sent me to **proclaim liberty** to **captives***

*and **recovery** of sight to the **blind**,*

*to let the **oppressed** go **free**,*

*and to **proclaim** a year **acceptable** to the **Lord**.*

Rolling up the scroll, he handed it **back** to the attendant and **sat down**,

and the eyes of **all** in the synagogue looked intently at him.

He said to them,

"Today **this Scripture** passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

narrates, Jesus accomplishes this, not through Roman-style violence and conquest, but rather through his life-giving message and through his willingness to endure the violence himself, thus freeing others from that violence. He is indeed a savior, messiah (anointed one), and Lord in a way that Caesar can never be.

In contrast to Matthew and Mark, who place this scene well into Jesus' public ministry, Luke places it at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, where it serves as a programmatic scene, a kind of mission statement. Thus, Luke helps the reader focus on

Jesus' place in history, and this scene helps the reader understand what is yet to come. This historical focus is summed up best in Jesus' concluding words: "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." S.L.