

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The confirmation class has been reviewing the book of Exodus recently, with its stories of Moses and the freeing of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. That only gets you to chapter 15, though. There are 25 more chapters that include God feeding the people in the wilderness with manna from heaven, the giving of the Ten Commandments, the making of the ark of the covenant, and lots of details about how the tabernacle should be set up – that special tent that was the place Israel’s worship while they wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Today we’ll talk about some of those 25 later chapters, with a particular focus on chapter 32 and the story of the golden calf. The most remarkable part of that story is Moses talking God out of destroying the Israelites after they make the golden calf and begin to worship it. There’s a famous line there that gets repeated later in the book of Jonah, which says that God repented of the evil he had planned to do. That’s how the King James Version of the Bible expressed it. Our translation doesn’t sound quite so dramatic. It says that God “changed his mind” about the “disaster” he planned. That’s still remarkable, though, and one of the most interesting and important parts of the book, in my opinion.

But it’s not why I brought it up. I brought it up because of what comes before, the reason the Israelites were in this situation. I’ve mentioned in another sermon not too long ago that making a golden calf to worship seems bizarre to us, but that it was a normal thing for ancient people to do. And why would they do that? Because they thought that they had been abandoned. Moses was off talking to God up on the mountain, and apparently he was up there a really long time, long enough for the people to conclude that he wasn’t coming back, and neither was God. So they needed another god to help them in the wilderness, and making a statue out of precious metals was a normal way of connecting with gods. A burning bush was an exception to that rule, not the norm. I want to suggest that it is precisely this idea of abandonment that lurks in the background of our first reading and our gospel reading this morning, and also in the background of our lives in our own time and place.

The first reading takes place many centuries after the Exodus, even after the rise and fall of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, which ended in conquest and exile in Babylon. Now we’re some years after the return from exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. And to celebrate this new normal, which was still not quite like the old normal, the priest Ezra reads the Bible to the people, meaning the first five books of our Bible. And the people are deeply moved. Why? Because like their ancestors in the wilderness, they too felt abandoned by God. God had allowed them to be conquered, maybe had even arranged it. Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed, the countryside ravaged. By this act of reading the Bible, Ezra the priest is reconnecting them to God in the telling of God’s faithfulness to God’s covenant promise through many generations of their ancestors.

Our gospel reading happens another 500 years down the road. Jerusalem and the rebuilt temple are still standing, but Israel never became its own kingdom again. Instead it was ruled by a succession of foreign powers: Persians, Greeks, and now the Romans. The people whom Jesus addressed in his inaugural sermon here had also given up hope that God would restore their kingdom and free them from their centuries of oppression. Yet here was Jesus, handed the scroll of Isaiah at a Sabbath worship service, the prophet through whom God had promised to rescue and restore God’s people, boldly declaring that God’s promises were now being fulfilled in him.

And then there’s us, two thousand years still further on: Worshiping remotely again in the midst of yet another surge of yet another variant of the pandemic COVID virus, members of a

shrinking denomination among other shrinking denominations in an age when fewer and fewer of our fellow citizens claim any kind religious affiliation at all, and many of those who do have been coopted by radical agendas of one kind or another. We might not dare to say it out loud, but we have our own moments of wondering whether God has not left the building, as it were, and left us to fend for ourselves in a hopeless and hostile world.

I think these readings have three things to say to all of these three audiences, spread out over twenty-five hundred years. First, God is still at work in our time, just as God has been at work in the past through God's people, in spite of all appearances to the contrary. And God's way of telling us that is by connecting us to the record of God's faithfulness in the past, even when God's people have been unfaithful, as with the golden calf that I brought up earlier. We should not lose heart, but instead be encouraged both by God's goodness to God's people in the past, and by God's promises for the future to bring us and all of creation to the genuine, abundant, and everlasting life that God has planned for us from the creation of the world.

Second, these readings show us that we need help both to understand and to trust God's promises. The scrolls of the Law that Ezra read to the people were many centuries old, recounting events that were well beyond living memory. Times had changed. Living circumstances had changed. And I dare say the culture and the language of the people had changed. Ezra had to read the Bible "with interpretation," our text says, because a simple reading would not have been enough. He had to explain the context and the intent of the words to make sense of them for his audience. Jesus, in his reading of Isaiah, had to make clear that Isaiah's message was not just for people in the past, but had a fuller meaning that extended to his audience half a millennium in Isaiah's future. And I hope it's obvious that we too need help to bridge the cultural and linguistic gap with the ancient world in which Jesus walked the earth in order to hear Jesus words as words also addressed to us.

Finally, both of these readings make clear that the work God is up to is a package deal. God's concern is not just for a select group of special people, or only for certain kinds of people – the rich, the powerful, or the pious. God's concern is for everyone, but especially for those who are disadvantaged and vulnerable, in all the ways that that can happen. Ezra and Nehemiah in our first reading instructed the people to celebrate God's goodness, and to make sure that they included everyone in the celebration by providing portions of the feast for those unable to provide for themselves. Jesus' sermon is even more pointed. The good news he proclaims, the good news promised by God through Isaiah, is especially for the poor, the afflicted, and the oppressed, those whose circumstances bear witness to the painful reality that the world as it is is not the world as it is meant to be.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, the takeaway for us from these readings this morning is that God's word is as relevant for us today as it has ever been, from the word that spoke the universe into existence, through God's promise to and through Abraham, Moses, and Isaiah, to God's word incarnate in Jesus Christ. God has been faithful throughout time, and remains faithful to us today in the promises of our baptism. God has not abandoned us, God is persistent in accompanying us in our gatherings around word and sacrament, and God is determined to open our hearts and direct our attention to the world around us, especially to those most vulnerable and most in need of care and concern, so that we might become God's partners in reconciling and redeeming the world God loves in Jesus Christ.

May we rejoice in such good news, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.