

Unrolling Your Scrolls

Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10 Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 4:14-21

Jan. 24, 2016 Epiphany 3C

If you attend a Jewish worship service in a synagogue or temple, you'll likely notice a window at the center front. There are drapes to cover it, and behind the drapes, an alcove. In the alcove are elaborate scrolls with beautiful covers. The scrolls are the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the ones we call Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, plus whatever other biblical books they may use on that particular worship day. The curtain will be opened, a reader will remove and uncover the scroll, kiss it, open it, and read the lesson. It's all a beautiful reminder of the importance of scripture and the importance of continuity, for the scriptures have been read like this for thousands of years.

Perhaps you noticed that in our own scripture readings today two stories, both involving the unrolling and reading of scrolls. Unrolling the scrolls to read the sacred texts are a way of looking back to the past, of keeping continuity, of maintaining our identity.

But let's get back to our own texts about unrolling and reading scrolls; the first one is from the book of Nehemiah. A huge crowd was gathered; the people were reflecting on what it was that made them a people. But the emphasis wasn't on continuity, it was on reforming, on reclaiming a past that had been taken away from them. Ezra, the priest, and Nehemiah, the political leader, were working together to rebuild a nation that had been destroyed. After the Persians conquered the Babylonians, the Babylonian exile was over for the Jews, and many of them had traversed the hundreds of miles to go home again to a place that many of them had never been before. Two generations after the Babylonians had laid ruin to Jerusalem, had leveled the temple, had torn down the city walls, and had carted all the leaders off to exile, they had come home.

For a long time, they had languished in Babylon, like refugees, and had struggled to keep their faith alive. The struggle is reflected in Psalm 137. "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the willows we hung our harps, for there our captors asked of us song, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How can we sing the Lord's songs while in a foreign land?"

But now they had come home, they had rallied around Ezra and Nehemiah, and they worked to rebuild their city walls and to rebuild the temple. The new temple wasn't much compared to the old, but it was better than nothing. When the work was finally done, it was time to begin again the day-

to-day work of being a nation, of being a people of God. Most of the people weren't familiar with the Law in their day to day lives. Copies of the Law, the Torah, were few and far between, and they were written in Hebrew, rather than in the common language of the area, Aramaic, so most people didn't understand it. So this grand assembly was called so that people could hear God's word and accept it, a time they could say, "Yes, this is who we are." They could put past problems behind them, but reclaim that part of the past which gave them their identity and purpose—the Torah. Ezra, the priest and scribe, was the one who helped the people understand the heritage that had been ripped from them. So he translated and interpreted the text so they could hear it, maybe for the first time, in ways that they could comprehend. And they didn't just read a few verses, they read and interpreted—preached about—the whole thing. After a while, the people began to weep; maybe they realized how far they had fallen, how much they had to learn, how impure they were by the law's standards. But Ezra reminded the people that the reading of the Law was not an occasion for mourning, but celebration. The Law was God's gift to the people. As God's gift, the law brings strength to the people, and their strength is God's joy. This public proclamation of God's Word brought joy, because it brought the people back into relationship with God and remade them into God's people. As they opened their new temple, they were able to reclaim their faith as their own and rededicate themselves to following God's word.

Even today, Jewish people celebrate the last day of the Feast of Booths each year with a celebration called Simchat Torah—or reciting the Torah. Sort of like our lectionary on the last Sunday of the church year, the Simchat Torah marks the end of a yearly cycle of reading through the Torah, and the beginning of the new cycle with Genesis. It's a celebration of the Law as a whole, and Jewish people are reminded of that time of great joy when Ezra read the law after the exiles had returned to Jerusalem.

Our Gospel passage shows Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. He went to the synagogue. He too unrolled a scroll. He read words from the prophet Isaiah, a prophecy of the future that Jesus intended to fulfill. Jesus reads the scripture, interprets the scripture, transforms the scripture, fulfills the scripture. Jesus was true to his Jewish heritage. Like any male member of the synagogue, Jesus could accept the invitation of the synagogue's president to read and interpret the scripture. But Jesus read the promise of God's future day and proclaimed it good news for that very day. God's spirit would work at healing the ill; releasing prisoners from bondage; and proclaiming good news. He changed it from future tense to present tense. "Today this scripture *is* fulfilled in your hearing." Today *is* the Day of the Lord. Jesus used that scripture to launch his own ministry of healing; of teaching; of forgiving; of redeeming.

Both of the passages give us clues on how to live, as Christians and as congregations.

Unroll your scrolls by reading your Bibles. Go back again and check on your reason for being, as did Ezra and Nehemiah. Be a people of the Book, as we Disciples like to call ourselves. Don't seek dry literalism, empty regulations, but a living way to guide you. Irenaeus, one of the early church fathers, said that the Bible is like a pool of living water, in which a lamb waded and an elephant can swim. Whether you are just a beginner who thinks that an epistle is the wife of an apostle, or you're a lifelong student, you'll still find riches there that are just what you need.

Unroll the scrolls of your own life's stories. Listen to and tell your family stories and your church family stories. Claim your identity. The more you know about yourselves, good and bad, the wiser you will be. That's true for individuals, and it's true for you as a church, as a congregation. One of the functions of an interim minister is to help a congregation come to terms with its own history, to help it claim its own heritage. And what a wonderful heritage you have, as one congregation long ago helped form another; the two existed side by side for many decades; then they came together to create something new.

Unroll the scrolls that help you claim your purpose as a church. Study what the scriptures say, what your history says, and what your community needs are to help you identify your mission. That's what Jesus did at the synagogue in Galilee. He connected back to the past and then made a challenge to the present, and laid a claim on the future. You've been put here for a purpose—not just to exist, but to be a light to the world, the salt of the earth. You've been put here to share good news; to bring release from the chains that hold people down—chains of habit, of fear, of greed and materialism, of prejudice and pride that would hold people back from knowing the love of God in Jesus Christ. Celebrate your roots in scripture, reclaim who you are and whose you are, and claim your mission to bring good news to the world. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon