

Grandstanding

January 24, 2010 Emsworth U.P. Nehemiah 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10 Luke 4: 14-21

On first reading, our two passages – in which a central figure rises dramatically to proclaim the Word to the people – on first reading, both of these accounts sound like amazing examples of stagecraft and grandstanding. The setting, the timing, the suspense, the delivery, and the effect that first Ezra and then Jesus had upon those audiences was just plain masterful. It was grandstanding, in the best sense. It was creating an experience that no one present would ever forget.

It is obvious that both Ezra and Jesus made the most of their respective opportunities to drop a bombshell on those gathered assemblies. But did you notice that each spoke in response to an invitation from the people? I almost missed that myself. The NIV translation of Nehemiah puts it most clearly. “all the people assembled as one man in the square...They *told* Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses.” Ezra, of course, faithful scribe and priest that he was, responded eagerly. A high platform was built for him to stand on, and he read from dawn until midday. The congregation stood before him, and we are told that, “all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.” Ezra took full advantage of this rare opportunity to speak the Word of God to men, women, and all who could understand, but he was invited and urged to do so by the people themselves. They even built a platform for his grandstanding.

In a similar way, we read in Luke that Jesus' reputation as a teacher had preceded him, and that people in the various synagogues of Galilee praised him. Coming to his hometown of Nazareth, he went to the synagogue as he had always done growing up there. We don't know too much about synagogue worship in the first century, but there was a set cycle of readings from the Torah and perhaps (we're not certain) from the prophets as well. It is thought that various people would have been asked to lead in reading and praying.

Like Ezra, Jesus took advantage of an opportunity to preach, and upon standing was given the scroll of Isaiah. As he sat down, Luke tells us, "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." They were waiting breathlessly, silently urging him on, inviting him to teach them what those words from Isaiah meant. In their eager anticipation, they were almost begging him to grandstand.

Now this is where our two texts part company. Ezra read and he and the other scribes interpreted the Law of Moses for six hours straight until the people understood. [Keep that in mind the next time you think that Tom is preaching overlong.] Their response to the teaching was to mourn and weep. They were overwhelmed by this revelation and by the fact that they had not been living according to God's word. That scene of electric anticipation and eagerness to hear the Word became a chaos of sad lamentation for the people – *until* Ezra and Nehemiah and the other teachers clarified for them that this Word of God was

good news. It was something to rejoice in; this was a day of celebration and feasting and sharing good food; this was a holy day when they could participate in the joy of the Lord and find strength. This Word of God would be the basis for their renewed relationship with God. And so, the celebrations began.

I do wonder, though, how long that joy lasted. I don't expect that it was very long after they dismantled the platform and went back to the hard work of being the returned exiles who were rebuilding Jerusalem – I don't expect that it was very long before the fear of the Law returned. Because they could not fulfill the Law. They could not be faithful to the covenant. Sin intervened. They were human, like us. I don't expect that it was very long before the good news took on ominous overtones and the full weight of the Law's expectations became a burden to be borne, rather than a joy to be received.

It was different when Jesus did his bit of grandstanding. He selected just a few verses from the scroll of Isaiah. And they spoke of good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, and the arrival of the year of the Lord's favor. Jesus did not need to take six hours to read about the long history of Israel and extensively list the particulars of the Law. Jesus was not presenting his listeners with a way of life or a tradition that they could *choose*. Jesus was simply announcing that the Word of God in all its promise and goodness was fulfilled in

him. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” is what he said. It was a one sentence sermon that said it all. Do you see how different that was?

This proclamation forever changed our understanding of the Word of God. No longer was the Word of God something over against us, an impossible yardstick against which we must measure our lives and be found forever wanting. Now the Word of God was fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ – the Word made flesh. Now the Word of God was *for us* in a new and powerful way. The incarnate Word would be our Savior. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And it was not just those few verses of Isaiah, but the whole of Scripture and the Law that was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In him, our reconciliation with God was complete.

This was an announcement that should be grandstanded. Build that man a platform. Let him speak from dawn till dusk. Hear that remarkable good news of God’s salvation! Rejoice in it! Let the celebrations begin. Why were they all just sitting there in that synagogue?

Oh, that’s right. They didn’t build him a platform, they built him a cross. And they didn’t avidly listen to him all day long; they ran him out of town and nearly threw him off a cliff (read a little further, verse 29). The breadth of God’s salvation was not something that they could accept. They clung to the Law and to self-justification. They rejected the Word made flesh and opted for a holy scroll.

The initial joy with which they received his word was short-lived. Then they slipped back, just like Ezra's audience, into the narrow perspective of those who cannot hear good news, those who don't realize that chains no longer bind them, those who are still blind, those who remain oppressed, those who do not welcome the year of the Lord's favor, but instead still live in fear of the Lord's judgment.

We need to be careful that we don't slip back into that old way of Law rather than grace. We need to guard against anything that would separate the Word of God, the Bible, from the person of the Word of God, Jesus Christ. We must always see in this Word, the Bible, an arrow pointing to the incarnate Word, Jesus. We must have absolute confidence in him as the fulfillment of the Law and as the embodiment of our reconciliation with God. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." This is a truth worth grandstanding. This is a message that changes everything.

I think most people (myself included), most people still feel a little uncomfortable about the whole idea of grandstanding, even if the good news is that good. I haven't built a platform in my parking lot, and I don't stand out there preaching to passersby. But our texts remind us that it was the people who were hungry to hear the Word of God for the first time who asked Ezra to speak. It was those who had gathered in the synagogue, knowing that Jesus had a new message, who eagerly gave him the scroll of Isaiah.

Those who have not heard the word of grace *long* to hear it. They really do. And they *want*, they *need* to see your faith in action, breaking through that old restrictive religion of Law and judgment into an expansive faith that embraces the grace of Jesus Christ and that radiates joy. This **is** a faith worth grandstanding. Your life is your platform. So live in the joy of the gospel, and as God works in and through us, those who have eyes to see will see and those who have ears to hear will hear.