

### Third Sunday of the Year – January 24, 2016

The readings today invite us to think about the place of the Word of God in our lives. The Word of God is no ordinary thing. How important are the Scriptures to us?

Some years ago when a woman's pastor was visiting her home, she decided to impress him and asked her daughter to fetch the large book on the coffee table in the next room to show the pastor. "You know, honey, the big book Mommy looks at all the time." Her daughter brought in the big Sears Catalogue!

The people of the Scriptures lived in an oral culture. They appreciated the spoken word, public readings, and speeches in a different way than most modern people do. Public speaking was often quite dramatic and often called forth vivid responses from the audience.

In today's first reading, Ezra's proclamation of the Word of God bound the people together and reminded them of who they were and who they were called to be. The people were probably hearing the Word of God for the first time in their generation and certainly for the first time in the rebuilt Jerusalem. After a long exile in a foreign land, away from the temple and their religious markers, the people were recovering their moorings. They saw clearly where they had gone wrong, and in a fever of fervor, they shouted their "Amen," fell on their faces, and wept in repentance. It was an unforgettable event.

And so we are reminded of the power of God's Word. In Genesis, God created everything with nothing more than a word. Isaiah the prophet tells us that God's word can nourish and transform us just as thoroughly as rain and snow bring forth the earth's potential.

We may not throw ourselves to the ground or go on a communal crying jag, but we can ask ourselves if our ancestors in Jerusalem have something important to teach us about the dramatic potential of the Word of God for those who have ears to hear.

The power of the Scriptures explodes even more luminously in today's gospel. Jesus has come home. Like one of the regulars he joins everybody in the synagogue. He's handed a scroll and reads from Isaiah. What's happening here? Jesus goes back into their tradition and clicks off their fondest hopes and memories. God would care for the poor; exiles and captives would come home; no one would walk around maimed and everybody would see the truth.

And then, a very short and very powerful conclusion: "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

Today. That's it.

If we take these Scriptures to heart, we can find ourselves sitting face to face with Jesus, who looks us in the eye and says, "Yes, today."

"You are my body. You have all the gifts necessary. Look around you – right now, look around. These are the people called with you. Today."

"Go! You will never be more ready for the poor, the captives; the blind and the oppressed are waiting for you outside the door. Right now they are waiting for you. Go! Today."

Let the people dare to say, "Amen."