

02.02.25 ~ Epiphany 4
“The Hospitality of Scripture”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 ^{NIV}

¹ all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

² So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

⁵ Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, “Amen! Amen!” Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.” For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Leader: These Words of Praise Are from God.
All: Thanks be to God!

Luke 4:14-21 ^{NLT}

Jesus Rejected at Nazareth

¹⁴ Then Jesus returned to Galilee, filled with the Holy Spirit’s power. Reports about him spread quickly through the whole region. ¹⁵ He taught regularly in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went as usual to the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read the Scriptures. ¹⁷ The scroll of Isaiah the prophet was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where this was written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released,
that the blind will see,
that the oppressed will be set free,

¹⁹ and that the time of the Lord’s favor has come.”

²⁰ He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. All eyes in the synagogue looked at him intently. ²¹ Then he began to speak to them. “The Scripture you’ve just heard has been fulfilled this very day!”

Leader: These Words of Jesus Are from God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Welcoming God, we gather here this Sunday reeling from the events of the week, the tragedies and sadness of human and mechanical loss and perhaps error. We ask you to comfort our sad hearts so that we may feel your presence and listen carefully to your words. Help us to find a message in them that broadens our minds about hospitality. May these words strengthen us for the week to come and motivate us to dig deep into Scripture daily as we seek your guidance in all we do. Let us hear your voice in this message. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Happy Groundhog Day! And Happy Vietnamese New Year! The Tet Festival is the most important celebrated public festival of the year in Vietnam. Our Vietnamese Gospel Baptist Church is celebrating it later today in their service and meal, so there will be many people receiving their hospitality. They welcome the Lunar New Year, which officially began on January 29th and goes for seven days with bright decorations, family meals, new clothes, gifts, and time to revere ancestors. We pray for their time together.

To give more background on our theme, *Vital Hospitality*, we start with Scripture, which is not what most people think when they reflect on this topic, but God’s words are foundational to our ministry, relationships, and faith. Since God does not physically write, the Scriptures are the human words of God’s voice as interpreted by his wise and chosen people. Scripture, though written by humans, is **of** God and not simply a human story **about** God or Jesus. Scripture welcomes us into God’s presence just by reading it and even more so by studying it. So, let us welcome God’s presence and wisdom through his word this morning.

The passage from Nehemiah takes place after his first visit to Jerusalem in 445 BC to rebuild its walls. Some scholars say it could be after his second visit in 433 BC. The setting is the Feast of Tabernacles, a one of many celebrations anointed by God; for this particular one, the people brought food offerings for seven days as they recalled their days of wandering in the wilderness (from Leviticus 23:43), and how God provided for them with tents, shelters, and manna. This was not an ordinary worship setting; it was a special occasion many attended. Whole families of men, women, and children travelled to the celebration, although only the men were allowed near the specially built wooden podium to hear Ezra, the priest.

Ezra unrolled the scroll containing the words of the law, and the people had an intellectual, emotional, and motivational response to God's words. They welcomed, comforted, and challenged the people. How do you think Ezra's reading at the Water Gate made the pilgrims feel? At home, welcomed to the party, or respected enough to be taught by a priest? I hope that might be how people feel as they come into our building and sanctuary, when I open up God's Word in the Bible to share. Welcomed, comforted, and slightly challenged. They brought special food offerings that day, as I hope you will next week for Souper Bowl; and they surrendered to his words because they were in a safe place where God's presence could be felt. How about here? We do try to make guests feel welcomed and comfortable, but can we do even better? What would that look like?

When Ezra opened the scroll with great reverence and solemnity, the people stood out of respect and some traditions do that today when the

Gospel is read. But after standing, they prostrated themselves by lying face down on the ground in humility. The Scriptures tell us that they wept; in their surrender to the power of God's presence through his Word, they realized how lax they had become and allowed sin to rule their lives and prevent their following of the law. For us, Jesus came to fulfill the law, so we do not follow their same checklist, but like the people in Ezra's hearing, we are often convicted and guilty of the daily choices we make. After Nehemiah reminded them **not** to be sad and contrite, but to be joyful and repentant, the people expressed thanksgiving, experienced the relief of confession, felt welcomed by God's words of Scripture and law, and most importantly, experienced transformation and a new holiness. Doesn't that resonate with our own special worship services? Could it become a weekly Sunday metric by which we measure our own selves? We pray for God's presence here and we often feel it. But are we going through the motions, or do we truly welcome God into our midst, and do we fully welcome the "stranger?"

In the same chapter of our second passage, but slightly before, Luke tells of Jesus' time in the desert, where he prepared himself after baptism for the ministry to come. That setting was the opposite of hospitality or celebration; the desert was a hostile environment: rocky, highly dangerous places, dry sand, with no vegetation or water. The devil himself tempted Jesus by food and power, then left when he failed. Jesus knew God was with him and would provide his willpower and supply his needs. And he did. Jesus then returned to Galilee as news began to spread that he ministered in the power of the Spirit of God.

He was popular and as his parents taught him, he naturally went back to the synagogue in Nazareth on the Sabbath day. To have a service, there had to be ten adult males. The Shema prayer recalling what Moses said to the Israelites was recited (Deuteronomy 6:4-9); followed by more prayers, then words of Scripture from the Torah and the Prophets, followed by instruction and a benediction. Jesus read from Isaiah the prophet declaring his role as Messiah to all those present! Through Isaiah's prophecy, he introduced those in attendance to God's divine presence within him. This familiar passage was welcoming, hospitable, comforting, yet challenging to comprehend. "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing!" The spirit of God was within him; his mission was to proclaim good news to the poor, release the captives, minister to the needy and the sick, and open the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf. This was shocking to those who had known the young boy raised in their midst. How could this be? It was the first time he revealed that the Scripture would be fulfilled in him. Like Ezra he opened the scroll and at first the people stood with respect to listen. But as they digested his reading and comments, they questioned his authority and rejected him in his hometown. As people do today.

Most people today do not attend church; they see radical hospitality in hotels, resorts, restaurants, even office buildings and hospitals. Why not make that same effort in churches? Some churches do have coffee shops, bookstores, etc. But are they welcoming everyone? Do they have greeters, a welcome desk, a parking lot ministry, numbers on the entrance doors for simplicity? We are trying. On our website, there is a tab "Plan your visit." So, guests will know what to expect here. Even on the home

page, we give details. This week, check out the website; that is how most people first visit. It could use some updates, but a professional said it is excellent for a new person to learn more about us. So, let's start welcoming, comforting, and yes, challenging those who are seeking to know God better. Hospitality is not just a good thing to do, it is vital to the life and thriving of this church! Are you still thinking of your questions about this theme? Share them with me as I build our lessons for the year. What does it mean to be hospitable? Why are we called to it? Is it vital to life or just a convenience? Is hospitality an attitude, philosophy, a core value, or a cultural expectation? How has it changed over the years? Will we share the Gospel with others? Or our own testimonies? Amen! ||

Let us pray. Faithful God, we thank you today and every day for our Savior Jesus Christ, his life model, and his teachings. Please open our hearts personally and as a church to answer your call to hospitality for 2025. May your divine guidance strengthen our own Bible study and purpose, drawing us together in service and evangelism. Please bless these elements as we remember your sacrifice in communion. In Jesus' name, we pray, Amen.