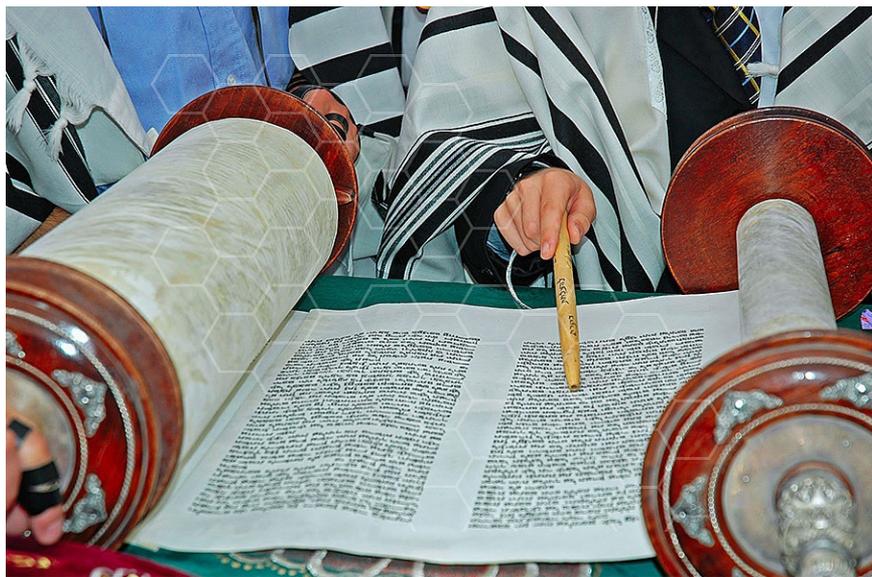


# ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

23 E. Airy Street | Norristown PA 19401 | (610) 272-4092



## EVERY WORD WE LIVE BY

**The Rev. Andrew F. Kline**

Text of a Sermon preached the First Sunday after Epiphany

January 23, 2022

NEHEMIAH 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 | PSALM 19  
I CORINTHIANS 12:12-31A | LUKE 4:14-21

After Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit drove him out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil for forty days and forty night. Our bodies can go without water for about three days. Jesus was in the wilderness for jut the amount of time the human body can go without food.

The devil is that spirit that was born into the world by the possibility of human freedom. It is the spirit of deception, yes. But also the spirit of rebellion. The devil, as we say, is a liar and a thief. The first thing he said to the devil, who suggested that he turn the stones in front of him to bread, was that “humankind does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

As the Bible tells the story, God chose Noah to shepherd God’s created things through forty days and forty nights of the flood. God then chose a people to settle a small plot of land in what would become the crossroads of the great empires of the world. They were always a small family of tribes. Just big enough to be a people, never big enough to rule over others, never quite ruling themselves according to the word they understood God speaking to them.

God chose this people to be his special possession not because they were great, but because they would be able to be a light to the nations, as special kind of example and proof of his existence and intentions for this world. His people were disobedient. They literally sold each other into slavery. And the great epic story of the bible is how God delivered them from that slavery, not taking forty days, but forty years in the wilderness.

But that is not the whole story. Once delivered from slavery, they prospered and became a nation. They asked for a king, and God gave them a king. David and Solomon were perhaps a high point of faithfulness in Israel, but it certainly was not perfect and it did not last beyond them. The nation would be divided, the northern half conquered, and the remaining remnant forever at the mercy of the greater empires.

And so Exodus from self imposed slavery led to Exile for seventy years in Babylon. The number seventy is as important as the number forty. The number seventy, marking out the span of roughly two generations, was the number of renewal, restoration, reconciliation and return. It was the law of the Jubilee given to them in the wilderness. Moses commanded them, every seventy years, to observe the year of the Jubilee, or what the prophet Isaiah called, the year of the Lord’s favor. Every seventy years the tribes, the families of Israel would be able to buy back any land taken from them, and all debts were to be forgiven.

Sadly, this law that clearly reminds the people who owns everything and their relationship to it and each other, was more an ideal than a reality. Though every seven years a debt might be forgiven, there is little evidence that every seventy years the people as a whole restored to each other their rightful inheritance, and honored the fact that God was owner of all.

With all this in mind, we hear today, as we can any day we open the scroll of Nehemiah, the story of what happened when the people returned from Exile, struggled to rebuild the temple wall, and in spite of every internal and external challenge, were successful.

Ezra and Nehemiah gathered the people at the Water Gate and from early in the morning read to them for some six hours. Most likely Ezra read the main portions from Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers, finishing with the three great sermons in Deuteronomy. Here, at the Water Gate, the people would begin to understand how God had saved them through water. From the Flood, through the Red Sea, to the River Jordan, from Exile by the waters of Babylon by the Garden of Eden, and back again to the Water Gate.

And the people cried. Tears of wonder. Tears of joy. Because who could not understand, hearing that story all at once, what a miracle it was that the people of Israel existed. Ezra says to them. Don't cry. Rejoice. God is speaking to you again. God's word stands forever.

It is a fact, whether we study the pages of history or the genetic history found in the fossil bones of the earth, there are many clans and peoples who have vanished from the face of the earth, whose story and DNA are no more. Indeed, given the history of the twentieth century, the demonic evil of Nazism, we know well that it is a miracle the Jews are still here, listening to their story, living by the Word of God.

Finally, their story foretells the coming of a Messiah, one who will fulfill all the promises that remain. He stood up in a synagogue in Nazareth, having returned himself from his testing in the wilderness, to announce the beginning of this process. The year of the Lord's favor, the beginning of the Jubilee. The poor and oppressed would be set free. The lame and the blind will walk whole and in the light.

Jesus tells us that today, yes, this day, you can be born, not just of water, but by the Spirit. Because those that are born of the Spirit, will live forever. Because we live by every single word that comes from God.

Jesus sits down and dares us all to understand, that in his story, all stories come together, all stories have their final meaning.

Today in your hearing, the Scripture is fulfilled. Amen.