In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from our First Lesson — from Nehemiah 8. There are two many characters in this story. Nehemiah is the governor. Ezra is a priest. It is as if they tend to both body and soul. Nehemiah is a good administrator. He has rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem to help protect the people. And Ezra the priest ministers to the souls of the people. They are a discouraged people. Ezra strengthens them by been reading the Word of God and preaching to the people. He does this, and they respond with tears. It is as if they have at last found their way back home, back to God’s Word, and they are filled with emotion about it. But Nehemiah, the governor, and Ezra the priest, encourage the people to be happy. They urge the people to be happy because that is the fundamental meaning of God’s Word. It means salvation. It means joy. It means strength. And so, they say to the people:

...do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.
(Nehemiah 8:10, RSV)

Those are the last words of our reading from Nehemiah 8. I mean to explain these words, as best I can.

Now let me share a secret with you; you would not know it unless I told you: For a good long stretch of this sermon, I am not preaching my own sermon but rather my wife, Carol’s, sermon from last Sunday. My own sermon last Sunday was on the variety of spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit has granted our congregation, our town, and our world. I hope and I prayed that it was a helpful sermon. But meanwhile, I had read Carol’s sermon, and I liked it better. That often happens. I read Carol’s sermon and find myself uplifted by it.

So, I am going to begin this sermon by preaching Carol’s sermon from last Sunday. I can do this because what she says in that sermon about Isaiah fits beautifully with what I want to say about Nehemiah and Ezra. It is the same historical situation and historical heartache. Nehemiah, Ezra, and this part of Isaiah are all speaking to the downhearted people who have returned from Babylonian captivity, but in returning, they find themselves a disappointed people.

I begin, then, with Carol. Her congregation is an elderly congregation. Many of the people make their way to the Wartburg Chapel in wheelchairs or using walkers. In fact, Carol removed probably half the pews in the chapel to
make space for the wheelchairs. So, she is addressing her people, not us. Still, I think what she says has meaning for us too.

I intend to let you know when I am done with her and am taking over myself. Carol begins this way:

If I were to give a title to this sermon it would be this: “The Best is Yet to Come!”

We may think we’ve had a good life – I hope you are able think that. We’ve all had our share of joys and sorrows, but by and large I hope we can say that things have gone well enough. Hopefully you’ve lived to a “ripe old age” without too much trouble. Your health has been relatively good [but] you know that our bodies are bound to wear out, as we get older. Can’t run anymore. Can’t walk as fast as you used to. Aches and pains come and go. Arthritis sets in, maybe some other problems too. At some point you may say to yourself that your best days are behind you, when you were young and strong and your career or your family was in full stride. As we age it seems natural to think back on those good old days with some degree of satisfaction. But now the best time of life has come and gone. However, I believe that our readings today tell us that this is not so. In fact, they proclaim to us that, “The Best is Yet to Come!”

Let me first turn to the reading from the prophet Isaiah. Last week we heard from the second part of Isaiah – from the book of comfort – which comes from the time when Israel’s exile in Babylon was finally nearing its end. Today’s reading comes from the third part of Isaiah, some years later after the exiles had been allowed to return to their homeland.

There was much excitement about that return. Hopes and expectations were high that everything would go back to the way it was before Israel and Judah had been defeated. There would be a lot of work to do to get there, but the Israelites were optimistic and eager to rebuild their lives. The most important thing was to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was the center of Israel’s life and faith. It was the holy place where the people would go to be in the presence of God. The Hebrew identity flowed from the Temple rituals, religious practices, laws and customs. So rebuilding the Temple was crucial to rebuilding the nation and reestablishing a sense of control over their own lives and destiny.

However, disappointments quickly arose. First of all, after fifty years of living in exile, many people did not return! They had made their lives in foreign lands and were now settled there. As we all know even today, picking up and moving to another place is major undertaking, and we do not do it lightly.

Secondly, the funds promised for the rebuilding of the Temple were inadequate to the task. They ran out of money. It was a huge job and the Israelites became discouraged because it seemed that it was just going to be impossible. [Eventually they did rebuild the Temple but it was not glorious
compared to the old one built by King Solomon.] Coming back home turned out to be much more difficult than anyone anticipated. And so their hopes were dashed and once again the Israelites experienced a sense of shame before their neighbors. And once more they felt that their God had abandoned them.

Into this bleak and gloomy situation God sent the prophet Isaiah to speak words of encouragement to His people once again. He says:

You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
   And your land shall no more be termed Desolate;
But you shall be called My Delight is in Her,
   And your land Married;
For the Lord delights in you,
   And your land shall be married.
For as a young man marries a young woman,
   So shall your builder marry you,
And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
   So shall your God rejoice over you.

Isn’t it interesting that the prophet uses the image of marriage to express the love of God for His people? This image pops up again and again in the Bible as a symbol for the relationship between God and the people He loves.

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Here ends the part of this sermon by Carol. She then moves from Isaiah’s image of marriage to talking about the wedding in Cana of Galilee, which was last Sunday’s Gospel story.

But I want to return to her discussion of Isaiah and the sorry state of the people when they return from Babylonian Captivity. That is the same situation Nehemiah and Ezra are talking about. These two leaders face a discouraged people, and in the name of God they are able to tell them they need not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is their strength. They could have said what Carol has said: “The best is yet to come.”

What we are dealing with in this morning’s story is mediocre days. We are dealing with the phenomenon of an unsatisfying season of life. We are dealing with the person who sighs and says to himself, says to herself, “NOTHING is happening! I’m going out of my mind. Days are slipping by, years are slipping by. I’m getting older, and nothing much is going on.”

Now, sometimes we are glad for peace and quiet, when things seem calm and orderly and predictable. But ever once in a while, we might slip into a mood in which we wonder, “Is this all there is? Is this all I have to hope for?”
When that happens, we might find ourselves near the mood of the Israelites in this morning’s Bible story. Ezra has read aloud for them what our text calls the “book of the law.” I bet that means the Pentateuch. It includes the great stories of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Especially it includes the wonders of the Exodus from slavery in Egypt. Ezra reads the Bible aloud for the people and explains it. Our text says that the people listen carefully:

and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law... (Nehemiah 8:3, RSV)

So, the people listen carefully to their priest and are moved by what they hear. When Ezra is done, we read of this dramatic response:

6 And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God; and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands; and they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground... (Nehemiah 8:6, RSV)

But then the people weep. They are so moved by their ancient stories that they cry — they cry so much that Nehemiah and Ezra have to remind them that this is a festival day and that they should not grieve and that they have strength in the LORD:

...do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength. (Nehemiah 8:10, RSV)

Why do the people grieve? I think we can understand it. They have just heard the ancient stories of good times. They have heard of Moses and the burning bush, of the wonders of the Exodus, of the parting of the Red Sea and the overthrow of Pharaoh and his army. They have heard of the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. They have heard of the manna from heaven and the thundering voice of God from Mount Sinai. They have heard of the conquest of Canaan. Maybe they recall King David and all his adventures and all his Psalms and holiness of life. Maybe they recall the glories of the reign of King Solomon. So that is looking to their past. And then, looking ahead, they may recall the preaching of Isaiah and the other prophets about the nations streaming to Jerusalem to be instructed in the way of the Lord, and about the wolf lying in peace with the lamb, and there being no more death or sorrow and God himself wiping away the tears from every eye.

But NONE of these things are happening for them. There is no parting of the sea, no thundering voice of God from the holy mountain, no stream of nations coming to them to be instructed, no wolf dwelling in peace with the lamb. Instead, they are a conquered people permitted by their conquerors to
go back home. But back home is a depressing place. They are hungry, they are poor. They are insignificant on the world stage. Nothing much is going on, and it is driving them crazy. Ezra’s reading the book of the law has reminded them of good times in the past and good times in the future, but they are in neither spot. They are in mediocre times. They are in a humble season of life.

And this, my friends, happens to be our situation too. We are betwixt the times. In our past, we have the wonders of Israel and the wonders of Jesus and the resurrection. In the future, we have the return of Jesus in power and glory and the setting up of his everlasting kingdom. But we are in neither place now. Not yet.

And this brings me to this morning’s Gospel story. You never know exactly what you are going to get when you surrender the pulpit to someone else. I bet that is what the rulers of the synagogue were thinking when they invited young Jesus of Nazareth to preach. They give him the book of the prophet Isaiah, and let the young man have a go at it.

And what a sermon he preaches! It was a short sermon. But if it is true, it is worth all the tea in China! It is worth heaven. It is worth a good life now. It is worth a new sense of adventure for the time ahead of us.

Jesus finds the place in Isaiah that speaks of good news.¹

\begin{quote}
The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, 
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. 
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives 
and recovering of sight to the blind, 
to set at liberty those who are oppressed, 
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. 
\end{quote}

Just take any one of them — say, “to set at liberty those who are oppressed.” The people of earth are oppressed by many things: by poverty, hunger, homelessness, illness, aging, indifference, injustice, sin, death, and the devil. But now this young man Jesus comes along and says,

\begin{quote}
Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. (Luke 4:21, RSV)
\end{quote}

And then he sets about to make it so. He spends the remainder of his life making it so. He pours out his life so that he sets “at liberty those who are oppressed.” If this is so, if what young Jesus preaches is really true, then our world is in for some good times. Sooner or later, all that misery that oppresses us now — all that poverty, illness, aging, and the opposition of sin,

¹ From Chapters 42 and 61.
death, and the devil — all that misery has suffered a death blow from Jesus and is on its way out.

And note this: Jesus preached this extraordinary announcement, and then set to work in accordance with his sermon pretty much in the ways that are available to you and me too. Sometimes he became weary, sometimes he was disappointed, sometimes he wept, and finally, he was vulnerable like us and he ended up dead on a cross.

But what a life of adventure he lived to the very end. He was on an adventure of love in this world. He preached and he believed that the ancient promises of the Bible were true, and he lived by them. There was no dull sloth in him. He was mindful of his heavenly Father’s promises and goodwill toward us, and he lived according to those promises.

We can do that too! We can be Christ-like—Christian—in the years ahead of us. We can follow his holy example. If we were somehow stuck in the middle of depressing times and had no definite reason to think we would survive and triumph over it all, it would be reasonable and human to be discouraged and lethargic. If effort is not likely to lead us anywhere, then why put in the effort? But if our work can lead somewhere, if it can constitute its own small contribution to the final victory, if we can use our time to stand at the side of the One who sets at liberty those who are oppressed, then let us go for it! Let us treasure more these days of ours. Let us count them precious as opportunities to join Jesus in fighting for the good and for love on earth.

My last paragraph is Carol’s: Life is definitely full of ups and downs, good times and bad times, joys and sorrows. But let us never think that the good times are all behind us, for indeed, the best is yet to come, through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Spirit, now and forever. Amen.