First moments matter. A baby taking his or her first step is videoed and sent to the grandparents. Entering the first grade is notable. And, then there are other markers in our lives that are noted, like our first bicycle. Our first day of high school. Our first time driving alone. Our first date and kiss. The list of firsts in our lives have meaning. Jesus has his own list of first-time experiences, and this week we read from the Gospel of Luke where Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth.

This will be the first time Jesus speaks in his hometown synagogue after becoming somewhat of a celebrity outside the town of Nazareth. His friends and family, no doubt, have listened to the wonderful healing and wisdom stories he has shared outside Galilee.

First things matter in the Gospels also, as they set the tone and name the priorities for the narrative to come. In Luke’s grand disclosure of Jesus’ ministry, the author presents Jesus as one who comes with power. It’s important to Luke for us to know just what kind of power Jesus wants it to look like.

Luke is careful to relate that Jesus went home and that he regularly worshipped in the synagogue. He was a faithful Jew, not someone who darkened the doors of the synagogue only at Yom Kippur and Passover. Jesus rose up to read. Someone gave him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, but Jesus selects the passage he wants to read. Jesus does what many speakers do when they want to make a specific point, he draws from a couple of resources. Jesus quotes from Isaiah 58:6 and 68:1-2

Which is what makes his choice of these excerpts from Isaiah so interesting, because if there’s one thing all the people referenced by this passage have in common, it’s that they are definitely not the powerful people in the world.

Think about it: Jesus brings good news to the poor, captive, blind, and oppressed. These aren’t the powerful, they are the outcasts, the ones you’ve been trained to feel sorry for as you pass them by on the street corner even as you give a prayer of thanks that their lot is not yours. These are the folks, that is, you may pity, but not admire. Yet Jesus says he comes for them.

All of which challenges our typical notions of power. Power – at least the power of the Holy Spirit, the power, that is, of God – is demonstrated not by any accomplishments or attributes one claims for one’s own self, but only through what it accomplishes for others. Power is power only when it sets others free, only when it builds up others, only when used for the betterment of those around you.

How peculiar, when you think of it, and how different from the notions of power that surround us. Indeed, the power of God at work in Jesus pushes us to reconfigure our notions of power and re-orient our attention away from ourselves to those around us.

But it does one other thing, too. In this first sermon of Jesus, we cannot avoid the conclusion that perhaps one of the chief powers of Jesus is to declare that God **sees all of us** – not just those the world sees, but everyone. Because the very fact that Jesus’ sermon is all about what God will do for the least of those in the world tells us that God gives special attention to those whom the world doesn’t want to see.

We read another first experience in the book of Nehemiah. “All the people of Israel gathered together into the square before the Water Gate.” Why? These are Israelites who just returned to their hometowns located in Jerusalem and Judah. They have been in exile, or driven from their ancestral homes for 70 years and are now back, and things are still bleak.

The Persians still dominate and tax them heavily.  External enemies still threaten them.  Internal divisions and injustices still set neighbor against neighbor.  The Israelites need guidance and assurance, so they ask Ezra to fetch a scroll he'd brought with him from Babylonia.

The scroll contains the first five books of the Bible as we know it.  Ezra opens his scroll and begins to read its stories--stories of creation, of Noah and the ark, of Abraham and Sara, of Joseph and the coat of many colors, of God releasing the Children of Israel from Egyptian captivity, of Miriam and Moses, of the Ten Commandments and God's other instructions for creating a community. The people in Jerusalem hoped there were connections between Ezra's scroll and their circumstances that would apply to everybody.  That's why they ask Ezra to fetch the scroll.

As Ezra reads the scroll, something happens inside the hearts of the Israelites, they begin to weep as the ancient words of God and their stories fill them with memory. Hundreds of years flake away and these former exiles discover where they are placed in the story of God.  They had wandered so far from God and had forgotten so much about their faith that there was a huge gap now between the way God wanted them to live and the way they were living.

A sense of loss and shame overwhelm them and they break into tears.  Ezra said, "Don't grieve, don't cry.  This is a day of remembering who we are and who God is.  Go home, prepare a feast, and share it with those who don't have anything.  Because this day is holy to God, and the joy of the Lord is your strength."  As they listen the Spirit of God touches their souls, and they bow their heads and worship the LORD with their faces touching the ground.

Do you see yourself in these Scripture texts? Can I find myself in these Scripture stories? I hope so. For our hope for living is found in both the Old and New Testament stories. Do we believe that God sees all of us? I hope so. As people of St. Paul’s will we continue to make a difference in the lives of all people. I hope we continue to reach out to our friends who are going through difficult times.

St. Paul’s mission statement says this, “As followers of Jesus, we hope to act in love so that all people are seen, all are heard, and lives are changed.” Our mission statement mirrors the idea that God sees all, and we as agents or believers in Jesus must see the needs, both inside the parish and outside the walls of the church.

The people of St. Paul’s have experienced many firsts through the years. Some of those firsts I have participated in myself, but I have heard other stories on how you, as followers of Jesus, made decisions to reach out to the people around you with love and provision.

The Psalmist feels the heartbeat of God with these words, “The statutes of the LORD are just and rejoice the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear and gives light to the eyes.” The people from Jesus’ hometown had a difficult time owning the power of Jesus, but as we read the story of Nehemiah, we read the story of a broken people, both in body and spirit, and they are ready to listen, really listen.

May we own these words as we go forward in our service of the LORD: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD , my strength and redeemer.” Owning these words allows each one of us to “love hope more than certainty” (Consider the Women by Debbie Blue, p. 7). The is Epiphany, looking for the daily revelation in our lives. Amen.