

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 23, 2022

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

Today's Word

*A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Porto Townsend, WA.*



If I were to follow Jesus' example, I would, after the reading of scripture, simply say: "You have heard words. Now go live them. Amen." If such brevity was all is needed, I could save hours of study, thought, and antsy, restless time in front of the computer. We could simply follow St. Francis' advice about preaching: "Preach the Gospel always. If you must, use words." Yet we come together in worship... hoping to meet God... not only amidst the gathered community, but in the whole of the worship experience... in the prayers, in silence, in the sacraments, in words of scripture, and in the illumination of the scripture message... as offered by the preacher. A large portion of my work is to engage with words of scripture, their context, and the tradition that has handed them down to us. ...and I will confess that I struggle with the process of sermon writing. The task demands that I wrestle with scriptures texts... to mine for layers of meaning... in hopes of making the day's scripture message relevant in our time and place. I think that the reason I struggle so much with the work of preparing a sermon, is that I believe that the purpose is to touch hearts, stir minds, and to tie into the Spirit's passion... that invites us to follow Jesus on God's Way of promise and life. The task is both challenging and humbling... and must be undertaken without thoughts of "success" for there is no way of measuring if... or how much... hearers find the message meaningful... and it is understood, by all preachers that each and every sermon could have been better. Such is the task. The work of preaching is both impossible... and full of blessings... for the preacher hopes to convey their own passion... about God's love and dream... to those gathered to hear a good word.

After reading from the scroll, Jesus sat down and began his very short sermon. All who were gathered in the synagogue that day were wondering what message this hometown boy... Mary's son... would preach. Mary's son did not disappoint. Afterall, Mary had sung her own Spirit-filled song... the Magnificat... a song offering a vision of reversals... a song that was good news for some, and bad news for others... a song of freedom and hope for those who have been abused and oppressed by the status quo, a song that is bad news for those who benefit from keeping things just the way they are. Mary's son has grown up to embody the Spirit's message. The same Spirit that spoke through the prophet Isaiah, announcing good news to the poor, release of captives, healing of the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the "year of the Lord's favor"... was speaking through Jesus on that sabbath day in Nazareth... as Jesus read the prophet's words... and that same Spirit is speaking God's vision to us this day... as the message lands upon us, seeking to take root... and grow in us. Jesus' sermon was brief, simple, and to the point: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Amen. End of message. And yet... those words seem to hang around. They resonate. The words have been passed on to us, inviting us to marinate in the vision... and, more importantly... to be challenged and inspired by the

vision. The words are meant to stir and transform us... compelling us to act upon the blessed challenge they present... that we may be co-creators of the prophets' vision... in our time and in our place. The words are meant to equip us with God's blueprint for creating heaven on earth.

In our lesson from the Hebrew scriptures, the priest Ezra stands among the people of Israel... men, women, and children who had gathered together before the Water Gate. They were a people who had known the pain of exile in Babylon, only to return to their homeland... and find it in ruins. The people who had gathered that day were probably aching from the traumas of loss, dislocation, the experience of oppression, and of generalized chaos. A vision of the future would have been out of reach. The vision of Ezra opening the book of the law of Moses... and unrolling the parchment scroll... would have been a powerful one, reminding the people of the long arc of God's story. Ezra reads for hours... from early morning until midday... as the people absorbed the sacred stories... stories of God's steadfast, patient, enduring love for the people. Debi Thomas writes:

I imagine that when the Israelites hear the sacred stories of their tradition — the stories of the Exodus, the stories of God's provision in the desert, the stories of their ancestors' failures and rebellions — they feel everything from nostalgia to elation to horror to happiness. They weep in gratitude over God's goodness. They weep in bewilderment over God's silence. They weep in regret over their own sins. They weep in mourning for all they've surrendered or lost. And they weep in relief that the exile is over, and Jerusalem — razed though it is — is once again their home.¹

I think we can relate to the experience of ache and dislocation. We are living in a pivotal moment. Though we have not been in a two-generation-long exile, our time of seeming unending pandemic... is wearing. In a world in which... loud voices of division seek to claim the day... and power is being hoarded... at a time in which the weight of human activity is causing devastating changes to our climate... all of it offering nightmarish visions of cataclysm... it is in this moment that the church is being called, again... to renewal... We are being called to be fully present to God's Word and vision that we may be stirred and challenged as individuals and as a community of God's people.

Now, more than ever, we need to hear words of hope and life that are seeking to make a permanent home in us. The church itself, is being called to live into God's living dream, a dream that was never meant to be static. We are being called to hear the Word anew... to consent to the Word's power... to wrestle with it... to allow it to wake us up in new ways... in a new moment of promise. A deep hearing of God's Word has the power to move us from the slumber of the status quo... into a future of new possibilities and blessings. This Word is meant... not only for us as a parish... but for the world. God's living Word is inviting us to loosen our grip on the cherished ways we have known church... not to enshrine the past, but to build upon treasures of our tradition... welcoming new ways of being church... to fresh ways of inviting the hungry in to be fed... fed not only with soup... but with vision and hope... in a shared community of caring, compassion, and celebration.

The writer Anne Lamott reminds us of ... "a lovely Hasidic story of a rabbi who always told his people that if they studied the Torah, it would put Scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, 'Why on our hearts, and not in them?' The rabbi answered, 'Only God can put Scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your heart, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside.'"

¹ <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3299-today>

As a people of God, who we know in Jesus Christ, we are a richly textured tapestry of community. We bring, to this community, unique life stories and a brimming assembly of gifts and talents. Gifts of community are, also, comprised of the common experiences of heartache that we share, fears that we live with, and the myriad experiences of pain and grief that humans can know. As a congregation we have walked through this stormy time of pandemic... drawn together by the love of God. We have adjusted and readjusted to the changes and challenges set before us. We also bring to the community the collected hopes and dreams that we have for ourselves, for our families, for St. Paul's, and for our world. A faith community is, ideally, a place of safety in which all are invited to deepen their roots and to spread their wings. It is a place in which we, together, are called to grow in the knowledge and love of God... called to grow in compassion for friend and stranger alike... Church is a people who gather together to be strengthened in order to be compassionate bearers of God's Good News in the world, whether we use words, or not.

A great man of spirit, Henri Nouwen, wrote:

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears.

The good Word... falls onto our hearts... and when our hearts break... those words fall inside to grow the Good News in us and among us.

Jesus doesn't simply say, "The Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Jesus says, "*Today, this day, right now...*the Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"... Now may the good Word sink in and grow. Today is just the beginning.

Amen...