

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

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By: The Rev. Linda J. Ferguson

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

Psalms 19

1 Corinthians 12-31a

Luke 4: 14-21

In the name of God: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Rev. Nancy, a mother, a blogger and a pastor for a United Methodist Church in Maine tells this story: Ten years ago, my cell phone rang early on the morning of January 20th. It was our son, Paddy, who had been standing for quite some time on the mall in Washington, DC, in the freezing cold, among 1.8 million people, waiting to hear President Obama's first inaugural address.

He and his friend had started making their way to the mall from their downtown apartment at 5:00 A.M. To this day, Paddy considers the morning of January 20, 2009 to be some of the most memorable hours of his life. The excitement of a first time experience, of singing along with old and young as he stood elbow to elbow both for warmth and in solidarity is something he says he will never forget.

As Paddy watched the first African-American take the oath of the Office, he knew that he was part of an historic moment – something that those people who sat in the synagogue in Nazareth, more than 2000 years ago, did not know as they listened to Jesus read from the Holy Hebrew Scriptures.

Today's Gospel presents us with Jesus' first act of public ministry. Following his river baptism and his long wilderness fast and temptation, Jesus returns to his home country, Galilee and his fame spread throughout the region. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been raised, he went into the synagogue, as he always did on the Sabbath day.

These synagogues originated during the Babylonian captivity after the Temple had been destroyed. They were never intended to be a replacement for the Temple, but rather were developed as places of worship that would be accessible to people, much like our own churches of today.

The typical service at the synagogue would begin with the singing or reciting of the Psalms followed by reciting of the Shema from the book of Deuteronomy. Then there would be prayers followed by a reading from the Law, the first five books of the Bible, and then a reading from one of the prophets. Then one of the qualified men in the service would instruct on the Bible passages and the service would end with a benediction.

When Jesus came to the front to read the Scriptures, they hand him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. There is no lectionary to consult to determine the reading; the choice is up to him. Nor is there a book to flip through. Instead, a bulky scroll is brought to him, and placed on the lectern. Jesus, unrolls it to a place near the end of the scroll. In a strong voice he reads aloud these words:

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to heal the broken hearted,
to proclaim release to the captives,
recovering of sight to the blind,
to deliver those who are crushed,
and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

He read confidently, with much expression, and with great passion because he knew that he was not reading a jumble of words strung together. He was reading his story, their story. Through Jesus, the prophet Isaiah came alive to all who had gathered in the synagogue. When he read this he rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the minister, and sat down.

The people in the synagogue that day had undoubtedly heard those Scriptures many times before. And they had heard of the miracles that Jesus had done in Cana and Capernaum

and his powerful teaching and they now waited to see what Jesus would say as He instructed them.

“To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” is the Jubilee year of release from debt. Every fifty years all property was to go back to the original owner, all debts were to be cancelled and all prisoners, or slaves, were to be released. For the Jews it was a picture of release, forgiveness and restoration. Israel never did adhere to God’s command concerning the Jubilee.

By the time of Jesus, the people associated the Messiah with the Year of Jubilee and looked forward to His coming as the final fulfillment of Jubilee – a time when God’s people would experience release forgiveness and restoration. And when the Messiah did appear that would be the year of the Lord’s favor. But I doubt that any of them were prepared with the ending words of Jesus’ sermon that day – *“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

This is Jesus’ mission statement, an outline of his ministry, the foundation of his gospel. This Scripture is Jesus’ inaugural address, his vision, his challenge to each one of us, and it is all about our connection to the poor, the battered, and the beaten. And with those words, Jesus reveals to them and to us that His personal mission is to fulfill the words of the prophet Isaiah and that the people there that day were all witnesses of that.

As retired Episcopal priest Grant Gallop says, “There isn’t a word in Jesus’ inaugural address about anything **BUT** social justice issues: there’s no talk about the sanctity of private property, the glory of the free market, nor the duty to pray three times a day or to avoid eating ham hocks or lobster tails. Nothing about swift and certain hanging for capital offenses. Nothing that you might expect from a religious leader of that time in history. **It’s all about how society is to be changed.**”

If I were to ask you why Jesus came to this earth, how would you answer? Maybe some of you would reply, “He came to save us.” Or, “He came to die for our sins.” Or, “He came to show us God loved us.” Or, “He came to fulfill what was said about Him in the Old Testament.”

But, you know, I think that Luke would disagree. Luke is concerned with restoration of this world and transformation of our lives now, today, and that is why he chose to begin the story of Jesus’ ministry with this very short sermon based on the 61st chapter of Isaiah. This Scripture is the way, the road map, the route to find Jesus. And that can mean only one thing for us: If we are drawn to Jesus as his followers, then we have no choice but to be drawn to his message.

And so the question for us is this: Is the Spirit of the Lord upon us, this congregation, upon this church family? Because if it is, no matter how inadequate we might feel at times, we, you and I, are the hands, feet, heart, eyes, ears, brains, and lungs of Jesus.

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians about how the Body of Christ, the Church, is to live out the mission statement of Jesus. As we strive to keep faithful to those words, we can pay attention to points that he insists upon in that passage.

- All members of the Church have gifts for ministry.
- The members of the Church have different gifts for ministry.
- The different gifts come to life in the context of the whole church.

And because we are the Body of Christ:

- Jesus calls us to sing out the Good News to the world.
- Jesus calls us to fill the bowls of the hungry and to walk for the sick.
- Jesus calls us to reach out to the ones that society has left on the sidelines and to listen for the people crying into the bleak darkness of their lives.
- Jesus calls us to do all of these things - because the spirit of the Lord is upon us too.

As computer blogger Jim Parsons wrote, “The one who is to come, has come. The one who will set the people free has broken the chains. The one who ushered us into the kingdom of God is watching and waiting for you to do your part. What we can take from these scriptures is an example of how. Jesus could not do it without the Spirit and neither can we.So our challenge is to find our roles, find our calling, find what we are created for, and then to proclaim it and do it.”

We are not called to live in the past and be imprisoned by the way things used to be. And we are not called to live in the future either, dreaming of an ideal tomorrow. We are called to fulfill this Scripture today, because it means that we, as individuals, and also as the church, God’s church, are called to radical action. Jesus is saying that the impossible can and is happening today, even as we speak.

For those of us who have been the recipients of God’s favor, His grace, in our lives, we should naturally have compassion on those who are lost. Like Jesus, we need to see the people around us as they really are, like lost sheep without a shepherd. And then we need to do everything in our power to and let them know that in Jesus they can find spiritual riches, freedom, sight and relief from oppression.

That does not mean that we have to go to a foreign country, or even leave our neighborhood. But it does imply that we aren’t just to wait around for people to come to us. We are to be taking the gospel message to them. **We have been sent...”To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”.**

All of us have been placed by God into different positions in this world. We are doctors, nurses, bankers, engineers, teachers, secretaries, chefs, consultants, mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, grandparents, aunts and uncles. But for those of us who are Christ followers, we all share the same mission in life: We have been anointed to proclaim good

news, and we have been sent to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. That is a tremendous privilege, but it is also a tremendous responsibility that we can only carry out with God's help.

This is our story, our Scripture, our calling. Jesus read the words from Isaiah and claimed them for his own. We can also do the same. Please turn to page 7 in your service bulletin and let us together proclaim the words of Isaiah.

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to heal the broken hearted,
to proclaim release to the captives,
recovering of sight to the blind,
to deliver those who are crushed,
and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.”

Living in God's promise is not about yesterday. Nor is it about awaiting some distant Messiah and eternal life in the Kingdom of God. It is about **NOW**. Jesus' words remains as clear, important and urgent as ever: ***“Today this promise has been fulfilled in your hearing - what we need is here today!”***

Amen.

Resources:

Sermon Central Resources for Preaching and Teaching

The Text This Week: Scripture Study, Worship Links, and Resources

Connections February 2015

Father Cedric Pisegna Ministries- Houston Texas - www.frcedric.org

NRSV Study Bible