

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany
Year C – Revised Common Lectionary
January 24, 2010
St. James' Episcopal Church, Pullman WA
Rev. Mary Beth Rivetti, Rector

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

My late husband used to warn me when the week would go by and no sermon was done before the weekend that some day I would just run out of time, and then I'd be left with nothing to preach. Well, this was one of those weeks, too many events – all significant and vital: a granddaughter visiting, reports due and meetings and communal meals, and a Standing Committee meeting in Spokane. And as George predicted, I ran out of time. So I looked back over my notes to find what I said before on these passages of scripture, and it's still good. With your indulgence, I'd like to repeat what I said a few years back.

I began with a review of what we were reading in the adult study group, *Amazing Grace* by Kathleen Norris, a series of essays that explores keywords that Christians toss around in ways that can from time to time prove harmful to those who hear them. Words like Antichrist, Idolatry, Exorcism or Inquisition. Words like Judgment, or Perfection or Silence. Or Preaching, where Norris talks about the sacramental experience of Christ in the words of scripture, or elsewhere when she reminds us of Paul's description of "faith that comes by hearing." Later she devotes a chapter to Lectio Divina, the ancient process of reading scripture deeply, and in silence to allow room for the Word of God to encounter us.

Today's passages from scripture call us to mind in a particular way to the sacramental presence of God in scripture. The first is the magnificent scene in Jerusalem following the return of the exiles, at the long-delayed completion of the restored city walls. With all the people present, Ezra the priest begins to read "the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel." The occasion is overwhelming. Everyone is there. Those verses we skipped include lists of the names of people standing on Ezra's right and on his left, the Levites who were present to help the people understand the words being read. To interpret the law as it was being proclaimed. Maybe a stadium-sized revival meeting would be the closest in our modern experience to what was going on. Or perhaps the interfaith gathering of religious and political leaders in Yankee Stadium in the days following the attacks of September 11, 2001.

The people of Jerusalem, who have wandered far and waited long, begin to weep when they hear the book of the Law of Moses. I try to imagine what exactly it was that they heard that touched them so. Was it the saga of Joseph and his brothers? Or the law given to the people in the desert? Or was it the breath of God on the waters of chaos in the beginning of time? Whatever it was, the priests were there to offer instruction, to place the word in context, to offer interpretation for the current time, to share the sacramental presence of God in the words of scripture. And ultimately to share the good news: "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

That connection between the creation and the law is present in Psalm 19, itself a poetic reflection on the Torah, beginning with the firmament of the heavens, through the praise of law beginning in verse 7, and turning the arrow inward: Cleanse me from my secret faults... May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight.

In our Gospel passage today we have Jesus the Word reading the Word and proclaiming that NOW is the Word fulfilled in your hearing.

The language of Isaiah was originally intended to bring comfort and consolation the exiles, and assurance to the returnees of God's providence in bringing them home. But TODAY in your hearing, says Jesus, this prophecy comes to life: "release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." It reads like good news to us from where we sit. But in just a few verses Jesus will explicate this text in a way that does not encourage people to go home and eat the fat and drink the good wine, but rather, they will be forming a lynch mob. The joy of the Lord as found in scripture will not always bring joy immediately to the people who are hearing it.

As Paul tells us, the response to scripture is a whole-body experience, and the members must belong to one another. Every year at this time, between the 18th and 25th of January, we observe the week of prayer for Christian Unity. In our household, those have always been the birthdays of my mother and my sister – so it was always a festive week for us, but for the rest of you -- the week is set between two commemorations: The Confession of Peter, on January 18; and the Conversion of Paul on January 25. Peter and Paul, the twin pillars of the early church, the one anchored in tradition the other pushing the boundaries to bring good news beyond what was familiar.

Bringing this up to the present date, at the meeting of the Standing Committee yesterday, we were asked to offer our consent to the election of several bishops throughout the Episcopal Church, including two bishops who appear to be at opposite poles on the issue of the ordination of persons in same-sex relationships. One argues that to consent to the election of bishops who are gay or lesbian will tear apart the Anglican Communion; the other is a lesbian in a committed same-sex relationship. We gave our consent to both, but not without serious discussion about the implications of our actions, not without prayer and humility, knowing that our actions have consequences here and around the globe, praying that the Spirit has given us the wisdom to move in a direction that brings good news and recovery of sight to the blind..

As we leave today, you will each be given a copy of the annual report for 2009, in preparation for next week's annual meeting. This report binds together the stories and activities of the many ministries that are active in this church as we hold one another together in the Body of Christ worshipping here. The report includes our year-end financial statement, as well as our proposed budget for the coming year, documents that put numbers to the missionary work of our parish, the funds that it takes to keep our building functioning well as a place of worship, a safe place to gather for children and adults throughout the week, a beacon for our community that proclaims good news through our actions as individuals and as a parish whole.

In the weeks of Lent, beginning on February 21 and continuing through March 28, we will be gathering together as one congregation, with a service at 9am followed by discussion and activities. In that time we will explore our role as members of the whole body of Christ, that part of the body that worships here at St. James, as well as the whole body that exists in the world now and through time. We will also explore the ways in which each of us finds spiritual refreshment, through worship, activity, and community. May our lives knit together here continue to be a reflection of the good news proclaimed in Christ, the Word of God dwelling among us and calling us here to the holy feast of bread and wine.