Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

January 23, 2022

Luke 4:14-21

In our readings today, we have two stories of the Word of God being proclaimed among the people and then interpreted. With one, we get their response. The other leaves us hanging.

In our passage from Nehemiah, the people have returned from exile and they have rebuilt Jerusalem.

Having done that, they all gather together and they ask to hear the law of Moses. The priest Ezra read from the first 5 books of the Bible as the people listened attentively. Then Ezra and the priests offered some interpretation, so the people could understand what they heard.

And the people cried.

It’s not entirely clear why they cried. But I think there were two reasons.

The first is that they were mourning what could have been. What could have been if they’d never been sent into exile. What could have been if Jerusalem hadn’t been destroyed. What could have been if their ancestors had not been defeated. If their ancestors had not strayed from the teachings of God.

But also, I think they worried that if their ancestors had fallen short, why would they be any different? Where was their hope they would do any better at being faithful to God’s teachings?

In the face of their tears, Nehemiah and Ezra told the people to stop crying, to put aside their mourning, and to rejoice.

Why?

Because it was not too late for them. They had a new opportunity to do things better. To make better choices. To be more faithful to the teachings of God. To leave the land of What Had Been behind and move on to the land of What Can Be.

It was time to feast and celebrate, because God had delivered them. Because the joy of the Lord was their strength for the future.

They were no longer an exiled people. They were being re-formed as the people of God. Which put them in the midst of the new thing that God was doing.

Rather than see the teachings as an impossible burden, as useful only for pointing out where they fell short, the people were encouraged to embrace God’s Word. To find hope there, to find a better way forward. To learn from their ancestors’ mistakes and choose the path of What Can Be, the path of faithfulness to God’s teachings for their own future.

Because in those teachings lies the future God intends for humanity. In them lies the promise of God’s continual presence, and the assurance of God’s mercy.

After his baptism and his time spent in the wilderness, Jesus began his public ministry. He started at by going to various synagogues throughout Galilee, where everybody praised him.

Which always makes me wonder how much they were actually listening to what he said.

Eventually, Jesus goes to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. He’s handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus unrolls the scroll to just the right place and reads from it.

Then he rolls the scroll back up and hands it to the attendant. As was customary, he sat down to teach.

I can’t help but wonder at this point if Jesus took the same preaching class as Jonah. Both deliver very effective one sentence sermons.

Clearly, this was not a preaching class offered at *my* seminary.

Jesus simply says, “today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

We have to wait till next week for the response. Spoiler: It doesn’t go so well.

If it didn’t go well, then how was it effective?

With this little sermon, Jesus offers the people an introduction to what his ministry is going to be all about.

He could have picked any passage at all from Isaiah. But he specifically chose *this* portion. And then said it was fulfilled.

Not “going to be fulfilled.”

But it *was* fulfilled. Right then and there.

Jesus, the anointed one, was there in the people’s midst to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

How will the people respond? Will they love him, like people elsewhere?

Unlike that summer in 1980 when everyone was itching to know who shot J. R. Ewing — except for *me*, because I was too young to watch *Dallas* — we don’t have to wait to find out what happens.

Because *we* get the advantage of reading Luke’s Gospel, we’ve already heard the song of his mother, which sounds an awful lot like what Jesus read from Isaiah. And we’ve already heard about his baptism, the declaration from the heavens, “You are my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” And we know about his temptation in the wilderness, where he was sustained by the Holy Spirit.

And we know that he’ll do all the things he promises.

We also know that his message is not one welcomed by all who hear it.Which shouldn’t surprise us. Because if you were the one benefitting from the captives and the oppressed, why would you want someone setting them free?

When we read Jesus’ words, “today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” it’s a reminder for us that it’s always “today.” It’s always the right time to do the things he speaks of. It’s always the right time to return to the path of the teachings of God.

God is constantly pointing us to the land of What Can Be, with God’s teachings as the pathway.

In the land of What Can Be, the captives are set free, the blind recover their sight, and the oppressed go free. In the land of what can be, all people have *enough*. Enough food, enough shelter, enough safety, enough love, that they can embrace the gifts God has given them and grow into who they were created to be. In the land of what can be, Paul’s words about unity in the Spirit are a reality. We delight in our obedience to God’s teachings, and take comfort in the promises of God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Just as with the people who listened to Nehemiah, and the people who listened to Jesus, we gather together to hear the Word proclaimed and interpreted. And like them…we decide how to respond.

Is this good news we will embrace? Will we embrace Jesus’ ministry of releasing captives, setting free the oppressed? And if so, what will that look like for our lives?

As we ponder these things, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God.