

“Being About the Good News”

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**Sunday, January 24, 2016
Third Sunday after Epiphany**

Readings from Scripture: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 and Luke 4:14-21

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

And Nehemiah, who was the governor; and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Then he said to them, “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.”

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

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Luke 4:14-21

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us carry within, the words we offer in song and in prayer, the words of scripture and the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform them all into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ our Lord and let that word do its work within us, among us and through us out into a hurting and broken world. We ask this in Christ's faithful name. Amen.

Last week I found myself in Sarasota, Florida, where it was 70 degrees. And then on Wednesday night I flew back to St. Louis arriving rather late and it was 7 degrees. Let me tell you it's not easy making the transition from 70 to 7 degrees. It was late so I went home and took lots of drugs and went to bed. I woke up the next morning and I asked my wife, "How are you doing?" And she said, "Oh, I've been home sick all week." And I said, "Oh, no." And then we chatted some more and she said, "Well, I've got the bug." And I said, "Have you gone to the doctor to take care of it?" She said, "Oh, no I have an appointment tomorrow, but that's not the bug I'm talking about." I'm like "What?" She said, "I caught the bug--Ancestry.com." I'm like, "What?" She said, "I've been home all week, so guess what I've been doing? I've been researching my great-great-grandmother and trying to find out how many were this and what was going on with that one and on and on and on." I said, "Oh, Lord, are you kidding me? Ancestry.com.?" And she's like, "Oh, yeah, but don't worry, David, it's a free trial." I said, "Free as in no credit card involved?" And she said, "Oh, no, no, no, just free." I'm like, "So they have our money?" And she's like, "Yep."

I'm really glad she's not here right now. Because a couple days later I found myself sitting near an unattended computer and I went onto Ancestry.com myself. And I plugged in my father's name, to see what information would come up and one of the things that my father has told me repeatedly is that his father is named Andy Holyan, not Andrew, no middle name--Andy Holyan. So I kept looking. I found my grandfather and then I wondered about his father. My grandfather's name is Andy so I wondered if his father's name was Andy. I found some information that said that my great-grandfather came to America on a ship from Fiume, Croatia, in the early 1900s and landed in New York City. His name was Andres Holyan with a little accent over the "a". On Ancestry.com I was actually able to see the ship manifest where someone had handwritten in his information as a passenger. I learned that he came over on a ship called Pannonia and that it took 17 days for them to get from Croatia to the U.S. Andres, not Andy.

As it sat with this information and was really just stunned to be able to see an actual copy of the manifest of the ship, I began to think about all the stories that I had heard about where my family had been from. I had heard stories about how my great-grandfather was an orphan who came over to America as a little child and that he grew up in Austria. The information that was provided said that maybe the Austria part was correct, but he did not come over as a little child. He was much older. I learned that he spoke Slovenian and no English and that his first job as recorded in a census was as a coal miner. He could not read or write English. He did not own a home. But he mined coal for a living. This was similar to what I had heard but it was different enough that it began to just kinda work on me that sometimes the stories that we know about ourselves and our history inform who we think we are and when those stories change factually, we need to rework the story of our own identity. I'm still not quite sure what it means to be the great-great-grandson of an illiterate coal miner. But I kinda like the grit of that story and am excited to go back on Ancestry and learn more.

I was doing this in the afternoon and then in my early morning time coming to the Gospel of Luke. I'm reading about Jesus first "ta da" moment of public ministry where he basically says to us and to the world, *this is what I am about*. He says, *the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to 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*. It dawned on me that so many times I read the scripture as a story about Jesus, but I rarely ever read it as if it's the story of our spiritual ancestry. In some very real, yet profound and mysterious way, through the waters of baptism and participation in the life of the church and receiving the sacraments and hearing the message proclaimed, each one of us can trace our lineage back to Jesus saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, to proclaim good news to the poor, to release the captives, to recover sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In some real way this is our spiritual heritage, our identity. I don't know about you but every now and then to think about what it means for us to enter into the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through baptism, and to begin to put on the body of Christ and to act in the ways of Christ, and to carry on the ministry of Christ--sometimes it's like, wait, what are we doing? There are so many things to do, so many people that need to be cared for, so many needs and causes that need to be promoted, what is it that we are about?

I realized in this passage, Jesus lays out very clearly what it is that we are to be about. Now what I also love about this passage and that I love about the ebb and flow of the Christian life, is that for many of us especially if you weren't baptized as a child, but I believe even if you were, you come to a moment in your life when you feel that you are the poor one, where you are the one who is being held captive, where you are the one who doesn't have clear insight and maybe you feel blind, or you are feeling oppressed by either a sense of righteousness or guilt--at some time in our lives, we are those to whom God needs to minister. And as I was thinking about that and meditating on this passage, I began to change the language just a bit. I wondered about this. I wondered what would it mean for us if our identity as a church came from Luke 4 verses 18 and 19? The Spirit of the Lord is upon us all because God has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. God is sending us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

The miracle of transformation or resurrection or redemption or sanctification for us in the life of faith is that we who once were poor are now commissioned to go bring good news to those who are poor. We who once were captive have been released and now we are sent to release others. We who have been blind and recovered our sight are now sent out to minister to those that are blind. And we as those oppressed who have been freed are now sent out to offer freedom and God's favor to others. This is the eternal ebb and flow of the Christian life--that at times we find ourselves as those that are impoverished or captive or blind and then we find ourselves empowered by the Spirit to go forth and to offer good news to others.

I don't think this passage is a time for us to abandon our interpretive stance to scripture or become literalists. I do not believe that we need to go find those who are actually poor or captive or blind or oppressed. We need to do that but we need to do so much more. We need to understand the poverty of the spirit that infects too many, or the way people are captive to guilt or desires and need to be liberated. We need to understand that blindness is not only a mechanism of sight, but sometimes of the heart and that there are many things that oppress us from being who God has created us to be. But what I love about tracing our spiritual ancestry all the way back to Jesus and his proclamation from the prophet Isaiah is that this is who we are. This is our spiritual DNA, to be people of good news and release and recovery of sight and freedom and favor.

On my shelf this week I pulled out the book that Sarah Miles wrote about an experience that she had years ago. She was a woman who was walking by an Episcopal church one midday when they were having service. She came in and she sat in the pew unsure of why God was pulling her in and she didn't even really know that there was a God at that moment. But she came in. She sat down. They offered communion. She took that bread and drank from that cup and was forever changed. Because God's grace had reached out to her and in an instant she went from being impoverished to rich, from being captive to free and from blind to having sight. This is the good news that God continues to offer us and all people. We are the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ. This is our DNA and our purpose and our focus. And may God bless us as we seek to be faithful to it now and forever. Amen.