

Sunday, January 24, 2016
Nehemiah 8; Luke 4:11-21

Lois Harder

Hearing the Word at the Water Gate

This morning's passages are two stories of what sometimes happens when faithful people who are in some kind of crisis really *listen* to the words of God.

Nehemiah was the governor, employed by the Persian King, Artaxerxes. He is returning, with his people, to Jerusalem after the exile, to help rebuild their beloved and destroyed city. In this part of the story they had just finished rebuilding the city wall and re-settling some of their towns. It was the High, Holy Days when their priest, Ezra, called the people together and began to read... not just to read, but to remind, to encourage, to renew, to revive, one could say, to anoint the people with their own tradition.

And the people were ready. They were full of anticipation and hope. Because they had just come through – and they were still in the midst of – a time of deep darkness, oppression and destruction and they were trying to regain their strength. So they gathered. Not just the men. Not just the priests and Levites. Not just the Executive Committee or the decision makers, no! They ALL gathered, facing the square at the Water Gate – the place that represented their common humanity, their unity and oneness. The place where EVERYONE could and did gather, whether they were ritually clean or not. EVERYONE came. Men, women, children – “those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.” And Ezra stood up on a high platform so that he could be seen and heard – and he began to read. He began to remind them of their tradition. He began to encourage them and renew and revive them, to help them remember that Yahweh was their God and they were the people of Yahweh. They had rebuilt the wall and now Ezra was rebuilding their faith. And he read. He started to read in the early morning and he read and preached, and preached and read... until midday. And the people listened! And they said “Amen!” and “Hallelujah!” and “Preach!” And they lifted their hands and they bowed their heads and worshiped God and they wept as they remembered who they were. They met at the Water Gate because they were thirsty. They were thirsty for these words of God, for the laws of God, for the Torah. And finally, when their spirits were full, Ezra blessed them and sent them and said, “Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and don't forget to share. And don't be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. And don't forget that.”

Fast forward several hundred years to Nazareth – Jesus' home town. This is Jesus' inaugural speech in the gospel of Luke. Not that he has won any elections, mind you! Nevertheless, what we have here is his mission statement, his keynote, in a nutshell, his purpose and plan. And like Ezra, Jesus was also reading and interpreting scripture to the people, reminding them, encouraging them, renewing and reviving them in their own faith tradition. They were also a people in crisis, under the heavy fist of Rome and their own misguided leaders who were power hungry, fearful and caught up in the cruel political games of their time.

Jesus, however, rather than just reading and interpreting the scripture, *embodied* it. He had just come from his desert retreat with the devil and he was anointed, loaded for bear. He was filled with power. Not political power or economic power or military power – he was filled with Holy Spirit power! He reminded his listeners, his congregation, his friends and family, through Isaiah’s prophetic words, that Yahweh was their God and they were God’s people. He reminded them that God has good news – especially for the poor. God will release the captives, restore sight to the blind, free the oppressed and bring the Jubilee year for the exploited!

Astounding words of deep comfort, but, of course, comforting words are often the most meaningful to those who are living with the most discomfort. Jesus’ listeners were initially amazed and impressed with the hometown boy making good. But just a couple verses later, Jesus sets them back on their heels when he tells them that it is, in fact, their own inability to accept God’s good news for the “other” that will prevent them from receiving it themselves. He infuriates them with his unorthodox inclusion of foreigners and sinners as recipients of God’s good news – and they go from loving him to fearing him and running him out of town in the span of six verses!

Jesus’ love is too big. His Holy Spirit power is too powerful. It blows our comfortable, certain, cut and dried minds. Jesus’ love crosses all the lines and his invitations to participate in God’s kingdom just don’t have any appropriate boundaries. Because, not only do the most powerless people receive the help and comfort that God offers, but they/we are also invited to extend it, to offer it, to BE the help and comfort that God has offered! We are also anointed, just as Jesus was anointed, to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to *be* God’s good news in the world.

In order to do this, we must, like Jesus, be filled with God’s Holy Spirit power and let that power of love move us to be inclusive, welcoming, hospitable, crossing the lines of bigotry, prejudice, fear and hate. How can we be welcoming to refugees, people who have suffered unknown and unthinkable indignities? How can we restore some of their dignity? How can we stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters of color and move beyond mere tolerance to real relationships of respect and friendship? How can we bear witness and give testimony to the power of love for bringing a just peace? How can we raise our voices to speak for those who have no voice?

None of us can do it alone, of course. This is part of what it means for the church to be the body of Christ, what Paul was describing in his letter to the Corinthians. God has uniquely gifted each member of the faith community to be God’s hands delivering good news to all we meet. We have each been given a passion and Holy Spirit power to be attentive to different sorts of needs, situations and people. Allowing and encouraging one another to use our God-given gifts is what makes the body of Christ live and breathe and move.

We are reminded this morning that we are ALL invited to gather at the Water Gate, any and all of us who can hear and understand. Let us come together to listen attentively, with eager anticipation, to the stories of the faithfulness of our God, to remember our need before God, to be

anointed by the Holy Spirit, to affirm the amazing beauty of each member of the body as we work together to BE God's good news.

I close with a poem by Andrew King called "Lord, Be the One Who Reads to Us".

Lord, be the one who reads to us this morning.

Speak to us the words of Holy Scripture.

May your words enter the air like breezes wafting,
enter the air like spring rain strongly falling,
like birds dipping and diving over the quiet pond
of your people's attentive listening.

Let your words enter our blood like quick fish swimming,
swimming as if exploring the streams of home,
urgent as if to seek a place of spawning,
flashing like dreams reflecting on memory's stones.

May your words enter our minds as sharpened instruments,
edged like a master carpenter's metal tools
that cut into the wood of hardened thinking,
that cut across the grain of dark imaginings,
that carve out bold new shapes for our minds to use.

Let your words burn in our hearts as fragments of flame
with brightness almost beyond our eyes' beholding,
kindling fires of hope from despair's dark ashes
in visions of life reborn from oppression's shadow,
vivid with joy and the glory of grace unveiled.

Then let the words sing in our souls like a harmony of nations
chorus together in thanks for a world made new.
And the song that rises like sun in the freshness of morning
is the music of your people praising what (Your) love can do.

Resources:

<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1771>

<http://journeytopenue1.com/2016/01/17/epiphany-3c-reading-between-the-lines/>

<http://www.davidlose.net/2016/-1/epiphany-3-c-a-peculiar-power/>

Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 1