

Sermon, Epiphany 3C, January 27, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.” (Psalm 19:14)

Let’s take a peek at what has taken place up to now. In chapter 3 of Luke we hear about the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. In this version of the story the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove. Then in the beginning of chapter 4 we hear that, “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, was led by the Spirit into the wilderness...” (Luke 4:1) There, *armed only with Scripture*, Jesus resists the temptations by the devil. At the beginning of today’s Gospel, Luke tells us again that Jesus is “...Filled with the power of the Spirit.” (Luke 4:14) Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, near his home town of Nazareth.

Unlike the accounts of Jesus in the other Gospels, we hear more about Jesus’ growing-up years in Nazareth. Luke has a special way with narrative detail. We see a domestic life rooted in religious observance. Jesus is presented by his parents in the temple in Jerusalem. The prophets Simeon and Anna are guided there to offer their blessings to this special child. To this day we use the *Song of Simeon* as a canticle in the Daily Office. Luke is the only Gospel with a story of Jesus as an adolescent. He gives his parents a scare when he stays behind in the temple in Jerusalem where they go annually to celebrate Passover. He confounds them by saying, “I must be in my Father’s house!” (Luke 3:49) It makes sense to me, then,

that Jesus' first act as an adult is to read and interpret Scripture in the synagogue as rabbi.

Scripture has a prominent place in our liturgy as it has with our Jewish brothers and sisters. I have a vivid memory of attending a *bat mitzvah* for the daughter of friend. I was moved when the sacred scrolls were brought out. Everyone reaches out to touch them with the ends of their prayer shawls as they are borne throughout the congregation. In his book *Lectio Divina*, M. Basil Pennington describes it as each one “[taking] the scrolls and [dancing] with them as with a beloved.” (Pennington, p. 20) We hear passages from the Hebrew Bible and epistles from the New Testament. We pray or sing the psalm together, usually antiphonally or responsively, emphasizing the cadence and poetry of the words. The Gospel is proclaimed from the middle of the congregation. We respond with praise, acknowledging the glory of Jesus' presence among us in the Word. Pennington says, “The Gospel is always and in every part a proclamation of the Resurrection—a shout of joy even in its darkest parts.” (Pennington, p. 22)

I have an indelible memory of proclaiming the Gospel for the first time as a newly ordained deacon. My ordination took place on Saturday, December 10, 2016 in Advent. The next morning I donned my deacon's stole, hoped I wouldn't spill the wine all over the altar when I set the table, and processed into the midst of the congregation with the acolyte bearing the Gospel Book for me. The passage was

from Matthew, chapter 11, and begins, “When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” (Matthew 11:2-5) So, whenever I hear today’s similar passage from Luke—much less have the privilege of proclaiming it—I get chills.

The passage Jesus stands to read is from the beginning of Isaiah, chapter 61, where the deliverance of God’s people is prophesied. The scroll dates from several hundred years before, during the time the Israelites were exiled in Babylon. And yet, when Jesus proclaims it, he brings it into his present time. In a few short verses Jesus is able to convey the full scope of his ministry: to heal, and thereby to restore, to bring good news to those who have nothing, and finally release to those who are captives or in prison. Isaiah adds—so poetically—that God will give the people “a garland instead of ashes.” (Isaiah 61:3) Jesus is able to accomplish this because, as Luke tells us several times, the spirit of God rests on him: he is the anointed one, the Messiah. And then Jesus goes a step further. He rolls up the scroll and returns it to the attendant and sits down. Luke tells us, “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” Maybe you, like me, you are waiting with bated

breath to hear what happens next. Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus tells us that not only was this passage from Isaiah part of God's truth for the exiled Israelites, it is still compelling in the present day. We can, along with those in the synagogue, participate with this epiphany: Jesus has come to proclaim the good news, certainly, yet Jesus is more. Jesus embodies the Word. In Deuteronomy we hear that, "The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe." (Deuteronomy 30:14) God's presence is conveyed to us in so many ways. It seems all our readings today affirm this reality.

I particular love Psalm 19 and the idea that the heavens themselves tell the glory of God. Even without words or speech the cosmos has a kind of voice that resounds throughout the world. I have always felt that when we get to those so familiar last lines of the Psalm: "Let the words of my mouth... be acceptable..." that the psalmist is seeking the transcendence of those voiceless and yet singing stars. In Nehemiah the people hear teachings from the Torah and are moved to tears. Wonderfully, Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest, and the assembled Levites quickly reassure the people. They are told, "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 8:10) Great words to hear on the day of annual meeting!

I don't know about you, but I know that I am already a bit weary from winter. I am looking for those things that will revivify and revitalize me. As it says in Psalm 19, "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul..." (Psalm 19:7) Yet we may think of books, particularly books of Scripture, as being dull, dried-up, a chore to read. We may approach Scripture as we might in trying to get more fiber in our diet. (I am only half-way through the bag of organic kale I bought recently). More and more I find there is an aliveness in Scripture that can sometimes bring that refreshment I am seeking. It can be like the scent of a peeled clementine. Thomas Merton says this about Scripture: "By reading the scriptures I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around me and with me. The sky seems to be a purer, a cooler blue, the trees a deeper green, light is sharper on the outlines of the forest and the hills, and the whole world is charged with the glory of God and I feel fire and music under my feet."

I am meant to have a commitment to saying the Daily Office as part of my rule of life. It can become something to check off, a duty. As familiar as the prayers and canticles may be by now, I am often surprised with how restorative even one phrase can be, or how I will hear something in a new way. Recently I read this from Isaiah 46, "Listen to me, you stubborn of heart, you who are far from deliverance: I bring near my deliverance, it is not far off..." (Isaiah 46:12-13) I breathed a sigh of grateful relief. What I did not even know I was longing for,

was, in that moment brought to me by a gracious God—with a bit of humor thrown in. The Word was near me.