

January 27, 2019
3 Epiphany, Year C
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Jesus' Purpose Driven Life

We make an assumption about the people who come to our doors to worship with us on a Sunday morning. We greet them and hand them a printed bulletin. The assumption is not they are cradle Episcopalians and will know when to kneel, bow, sit or stand during the service. We can't always be sure of their economic status: are they struggling or well-healed or somewhere in the middle – living like most people do – dare I say “paycheck to paycheck.” The assumption that we are making handing them a service bulletin is that they can read. In English. We are printed word centric, which is why I wanted us to try something different and just listen to the words of the Gospel.

In the centuries before Jesus, the people of Israel told and retold their sacred stories orally – they spoke and listened to them from one generation to the next. What they heard grounded and formed their lives. They were a people: loved by God and never forgotten. When the sacred stories and psalms and prophecies were finally written down, they were hand copied by scribes on large scrolls and read in public. There were no leather-bound printed personal Bibles in those days.

We heard first today a passage from Nehemiah – which I would venture to say is not among the best known or loved books of the Bible. What is compelling about the image is how the people, who had returned from home from the long Exile to begin rebuilding their shattered lives and remaking the customs they had nearly lost, they gathered into the square before the Water Gate.

It is believed that the priest/scribe Ezra was among the 3% or so of the people in his day who could read and write. And Ezra did read from the Law of Moses from morning to midday and all the people stood and were attentive.

What makes you and I stand up and pay attention with the same sense of urgency?

We know that attentiveness is a challenge in today's digital streaming world. We have distractions galore calling us to watch, click, like, share and respond. There are apps to remind us how much we are using our cellphones, which of course one needs to download – on one's cellphone. There is so much to wade through it is hard to know what is worth taking the time to read, learn and retain.

Nehemiah gives us a sense of what it means to be a gathered people looking for direction from the God who has never left them.

Enter Jesus in Luke's gospel who effectively says: I'll give you direction.

Jesus returns to Nazareth, his home town, and goes to the synagogue and like Ezra reads from Scripture in public. Word was spreading about Jesus: so far do good -- everyone was praising this hometown boy now grown. (Luke 4:17) Jesus 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.

If there was ever a mission statement for the life and work of Jesus – his echoing the prophet Isaiah pointed him and us to the central meaning and purpose of his life. In one brief passage, we see what drove him and we discover a roadmap and a guide to our own. Buyer beware: this is no easy to-do list.

“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 message is as simple as it is vast. To bring good news. To proclaim release. Recovery of what was lost. Let go and set free. To shout the Lord God's favor. And the object this call to action -- the base of Jesus's support – are the poor, prisoners and captives, the blind and otherwise cast offs. The oppressed.

Where do we find ourselves in this list if we do not consider ourselves poor, captive, blind or oppressed? Are these words of good news for others less fortunate or do they reflect back on us somehow?

I read this same passage from Luke during a communion service at the jail yesterday in Dover to immigrant detainees. I asked those gathered around the make shift altar if they saw themselves in the gospel. They blurted out: “we're the captives.” “We are the poor.” The young man being deported back to El Salvador this week and thinking about his return to home to a ravaged country -- he knew he made the list of the oppressed.

Friends, if we dig deeper and get honest and real about ourselves and our own lives, we know that Jesus is making room for us to recognize our need and deep desire to be set free from what hold us down.

How do we join in this work? Are we expected to accomplish all of these God and Jesus centered activities each and every day? Let me risk saying: no. Yet over the course of our lives we can use this call to bring, release, heal, and set free as markers to know when we are getting closer to what God wants us to do and be with this life we have given.

This past month many of her admirers mourned the death of poet Mary Oliver, who was 83 and longtime resident of Provincetown. I admit to have purchased books of only three poets. Wallace Stevens, because my family had the fortune of living in his one-time home for nine years in Hartford. Billy Collins, whose poems often make me laugh out loud, and Mary Oliver. She was a rock star in the poetry world – and she sold lots of books – no small feat. Her poems have been quoted widely in sermons and are taped up on the refrigerators, dashboards and computer screens of those she touched.

In her poem “The Summer Day,” she taps into the question that I am asking in response to the focus of Isaiah and Jesus. She writes: “what is it you plan to do/ with your one wild and precious life?”

For as long as there will be people with minds to think and hearts to love on this good earth, we will wrestle with this simple question. What is the purpose and meaning of my life? That is the spiritual and philosophical loop that we all push up against sooner or later. It rattles around in the minds of mystics and saints, and those of us toiling in the vineyard of everyday living: teachers, gardeners, parents, women, men, caregivers, bureaucrats, and barbers.

Mary Oliver thought and wrote a lot about getting older and what to make of it all. One of her most well-known works is “When Death Comes.”

When it’s over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.

Mary Oliver paints a picture of the world that Jesus could call home.

Let us not be mere visitors to this world.

Remember that Ezra and Jesus read Scripture in community. We are both blessed by -- and stuck with -- one other.

The life and the work we have been given is meant to be shared widely and often. It is world filled with people aching for good news – the kind of news that only God and God’s people can bring. To those oppressed by memories of the past, violence that shapes their days, and fear of the future that no one can know or control – what I hope we hear today is the message that we both hear and take out into the world is one of freedom and release.

So: what sermon might we preach in and through our lives?

What poems will we write?

What are the songs we might sing?