

SERMON
3rd Sunday after Epiphany – Lectionary 3
January 24, 2010

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

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

It was early on the morning of the Sabbath. Bearded men in long robes passed behind and between rows of pillars as they took their seats in the room. The room was lit by a clutter of low-hanging oil lamps.

In the center of the room was an angled desk atop a low platform. Backless benches were arranged on all sides. Looking down on the scene was a balcony filled with the wives and daughters of the men occupying the room below.

A row of dignified men sat in front of a heavy curtain at the end of the room. One of these men rose from his seat and spoke briefly to several of the others in the room, one of whom was the carpenter, Yeshua ben Yousef – Jesus of Nazareth.

The room was full, with many men standing, when Jesus walked to the raised desk in the middle of the synagogue. This was the same place where as a boy of thirteen, he had celebrated his bar mitzvah.

All eyes in the room were riveted upon his lean form, made more gaunt by the recent ordeal he had endured during a forty-day fast in the wilderness of Judah.

An air of expectation mingled with the smoke from the oil lamps in the room as he ascended the rostrum. Sensational rumors had been spreading all over the countryside about the carpenter's son, and he had already taught in other synagogues in the area.

This Sabbath appearance in his hometown of Nazareth had been long awaited by many in the room. Jesus began the service by reciting a series of prayers and recitations.

And then Jesus waited, briefly, while the Chazzan, the man whose duty it was to do so, carried a heavy scroll to the reading desk. It contained the words of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus, took the scroll in his hands, and carefully unrolled it while the crowd in the synagogue waited. He found the place he sought, and began to read:

“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.”

Immediately, puzzled looks were exchanged among the men in the rows of seats. This was not the hapharah, the scheduled reading for the day. In other words, Jesus did not follow the lectionary reading prescribed for the day.

Up to this point Jesus had led the synagogue service in customary fashion. But this was unconventional, a jarring departure, an unexpected development. The son of the carpenter was reading from a passage of his own choosing.

So Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the Chazzan, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he spoke again. “Today,” he said, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

For a time, the silence was deafening. Then the whispering began; “What did he say?” “Did I hear that right?” “Did he just claim to be the one that we have been expecting for all of these years?” “Isn’t this Jesus, the son of Joseph the carpenter?”

“This can’t be the Messiah we have been waiting for. Our Messiah will raise up an army to give us our land back by defeating the Romans. Our Messiah will give back to us what God had promised us. After all, we are God’s chosen people.”

But instead, Jesus spoke words of a different kind of hope. And it included hope for ALL people, no matter what their heritage or circumstances.

Desmond Tutu is the Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa. He was deeply involved in the struggle against Apartheid in his country and received in 1986 the Nobel peace prize. This prestigious award was given for his endeavor for freedom and equality for his black brothers and sisters.

In an interview with the magazine *Christianity Today* in 1992 Desmond Tutu was asked if he was hopeful about the future.

“I am always hopeful,” he replied. “A Christian is a prisoner of hope. After all, what could have looked more hopeless than Good Friday?... There is no situation from which God cannot extract good. Evil, death, oppression, injustice – these can never again have the last word, despite all appearances to the contrary.”

“Long ago, there ruled in Persia a wise and good king. He loved his people. He wanted to know how they lived. He wanted to know about their hardships. Often he dressed in the clothes of a working man or a beggar, and went to the homes of the poor. No one whom he visited thought that he was their ruler.

One time he visited a very poor man who lived in a cellar. He ate the same food the poor man ate. He spoke cheerful, kind words to the man. And then he left.

Later he visited the poor man again and disclosed his identity by saying “I am your king!” The king thought that the poor man would surely ask for some gift or favor. But he didn’t.

Instead, he said to the king; “You left your palace and your glory to visit me in this dark dreary place. You ate the same disgusting food that I ate. To others you have given your rich gifts. To me, you brought gladness to my heart! To me you have given yourself!”

Of course, hearing this story can only remind us of what Jesus has done for us. For Jesus has come to give us hope. Jesus has given himself so that all people may be set free. Not necessarily from oppressive governments, but from various forms of bondage and oppression; the poor, the lame, the condemned, the demonic.

You see, what Jesus is saying in the synagogue that day is that the Kingdom of God has now come among them. The words of Isaiah will now be fulfilled. But the people didn’t want to hear those words. These people understood the Scriptures as promises of God’s exclusive covenant with them alone.

But Jesus expands God’s vision by saying that this promise is for ALL people. This promise of liberation was for all the poor, the blind, the oppressed – regardless of nationality, gender, or race.

These words from Isaiah heralded the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. And the message of Jesus here is unmistakably clear. Jesus speaks of a radical form of inclusiveness. God’s freedom and justice is for all people, not just for a chosen few.

So how are these words of Jesus coming to fruition 2000 years later in our culture, in our time? Are the poor hearing good news? Are captives being released? Are the blind recovering their sight? Are the oppressed being freed? And finally, have we proclaimed the year of the Lord’s favor?

“The year of the Lord’s favor!” What does that mean? You see, what Isaiah is talking about is the “year of jubilee”. It was commanded by God to happen once every fifty years. During that year, all debts are canceled and all land is returned to its original owners.

It’s kind of like a “start over” that equalizes the playing field so that the rich don’t get too rich and the poor don’t get too poor. Probably would be a hard sell in an economy based on capitalism. I think that we will have to answer these questions for ourselves. But we can see signs of hope.

In 1961 an interracial group of people organized bus trips through the southern United States called “freedom rides.” It was to cast light on the civil rights struggles in this country.

Particularly it focused on the Jim Crow laws that banned blacks from restaurants, public restrooms, and public buses. The people on these buses started out from Washington D.C., and became known as “Freedom Riders.” The “riders” were both white and black.

During their non-violent protest drive throughout some Southern states, many of these riders were threatened, humiliated, brutally beaten, arrested and even imprisoned.

Yet they persisted in a peaceful struggle calling out for justice to both the government and the citizens of the United States. They knew all too well these words of Jesus that promised hope and God’s favor to those who were oppressed.

Perhaps we may think that things are much better now. This sort of blatant discrimination doesn’t happen anymore, right?

Well, just six years ago, bus riders patterned after these original Freedom Riders crisscrossed the country in almost 20 buses as they headed to Washington D.C.

The buses were filled with “Immigrant Workers Freedom Riders” who were struggling to raise awareness about the plight of immigrants and to expose injustice in the United States policies towards immigrant workers. They spoke at rallies and gatherings on their way to meet with congressional representatives.

Several of the buses stopped at the significant places of the civil rights movement including the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The same church where four young black girls were killed by a bomb 40 years ago.

During their trip, some of these riders were detained by law authorities. They were humiliated, scorned, and told that they had no right to speak. Yet they persisted in their call for justice. Indeed God’s grace and favor is promised to those who are oppressed.

In thinking about how we can live out these words of Isaiah that were quoted by Jesus, I thought about the words inscribed on the Statue of Liberty rising high above the waters of New York Harbor. I know that most of you have heard them before, but I would like to read them anyway:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,

I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

I think that these words reflect what Jesus was saying when he quoted Isaiah. And I think that the Holy Spirit has given us the power to continue to fulfill this prophesy. We have the power to breathe life into a world that is crying out for healing and justice.

You see, hearing these words of Isaiah and professing our faith in Jesus means that we believe that we too have a prophetic part to play in the building of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, today, this Scripture passage IS being fulfilled even while we are listening!

For we are the ones called to bring the good news of God’s justice, God’s mercy, God’s unconditional love and grace to ALL people.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu is right: “A Christian is a prisoner of hope. There is no situation from which God cannot extract good. Evil, death, oppression ,injustice – these can never again have the last word.” Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.
Amen.