

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

January 24, 2010

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

The day of the Annual Parish Meeting. In a few hours/ an hour or so, we will gather

to thank three leaders whose terms on the Vestry are finished;
to elect new leaders nominated from among the people;
and to take stock of our life together, sharing thoughts on reflections about how we have found and been found by God here in the past year.

Many reports have been written, including one giving our financial picture for the past year and the year ahead. That is one measure of our health as a community, how the Spirit has acted and continues to act among us.

Church Canons (law) and parish by-laws require us to hold the Annual Meeting. It is a good practice. It helps us to see and evaluate how well we organize and support the life of the community; how well the community nurtures our relationships with God and one another; how open we have been to God's invitation into new life in Christ.

One way to use that gathering is to listen together for a Word from God that may, variously, encourage and reassure us; challenge and clarify; startle and invite us into new beginnings.

The Church did not invent the practice of gathering in expectation of hearing a word from God for the health and growth of community, of course . . .

In Jerusalem all the people gathered together to hear the scribe Ezra read the book of the law—the Torah, the five books of Moses, Pentateuch. All the people: men, women, children together, outside in the square; not separated as inside the temple. All the people: the remnant of Israel who were born in exiles in Babylon, and have now returned; the remnant of Israel descended from those not carried off to Babylon, but left behind to fend for themselves in the ruins of Jerusalem.

It has been years and years since anyone in this community has heard the Torah read. After return from exile, life in Jerusalem continued to be insecure. They were harassed by hostile surrounding peoples who had troubled generations of those living in the ruin of Jerusalem. All had been preoccupied with the work of rebuilding the temple, then the city walls for protection.

Now that work is finished. They are safe inside the city walls. Now they can listen. They are eager to hear; ask Ezra to bring the book. (Many scrolls.) They stand when he opens it. He reads from early morning until noon. Four, five hours they stand together, they listen.

The Word that formed them at Mount Sinai re-forms them now. The Word restores to them their story, their liturgy and their festivals, their rituals of repentance and

confession, all the patterns of their common life. The Word makes their tattered identity whole again. Gives them back their life. Brings them together here, now, after separation for generations.

They respond. All weep: for sorrow, for joy; for all they have missed, and all they long for still. Ezra finishes the reading and blesses the Lord. All the people reply, “Amen, Amen,” *It is true*. As the psalmist sings: “The law/word of the Lord . . . revives the soul,” it is “sweeter far than honey, than honey [dripping from] the comb.” (Ps. 19:7, 10)

In Corinth, an entirely new community gathers. More mixed and diverse even than the post-exilic Israelites, some of whom had married foreign wives. Here are both Jews and Greeks–Gentiles–groups with no shared history of belief, liturgy, or pattern of life. Here are slaves and free persons, perhaps slaves and masters from the same households. And, as we know from other parts of Paul’s letters to Corinth, here are women and men, together.

All are in totally new relationships with one another. They have been brought together by the Word, the good news of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen Lord, preached and taught by the Apostle Paul.

Now they are seeking their common identity, and a way of being in community that will support and shape how they will find and be found by God in Jesus Christ. A way of being in community that will offer support and patterns of life to Christian communities down through the generations.

What will be the patterns of relationships for this new community? Will there be separate worship, fellowship for Jews and Greeks, slaves and free? Higher places at the table, choicer foods for some members than others? Positions of authority for some and not for others, based on their birth or their station in life?

The new community listens together as a letter from Paul is read. They hear a new, clarifying, challenging word: all are one body in Christ, now, already, today. Each member needs each other member. All are indispensable to the life of the one body. Those who assume they have claims to preference or greater importance will have to let those claims go.

How might this Word illumine our gathering today? Hearts and minds of all are needed for our listening together for God’s word to us. All are needed to reflect, listen, speak about where and when we have found and been found by God in this place. To hear and tell what has helped us to be open to God’s word; and how we may be called to respond more deeply and actively to that Word in the coming year. To discern what new direction or emphasis God may be calling us into; what we may need to let go of so we can respond.

In Nazareth a long-established community gathers in the synagogue. Jesus, one of its own sons steeped in the community's traditions, has come home. He knows how things are done; he reads well. The community has heard about his teaching in other towns; they have a chance now to see if he measures up to all the praise they have heard. When he stands to read, someone hands him the scroll gladly; they are all set to feel proud of their hometown boy.

But they are not ready to be startled by his words. They are not expecting to hear anything new because everything is already established, all the patterns of their life together already laid down. The words he reads are not new; are altogether familiar words from the prophet Isaiah:

“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.”

But his interpretation is startlingly new: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Here, now, these words of good news—release, healing, freedom, blessing and restoration, are present and alive in Jesus. He is anointed by the Holy Spirit to bring and be the good news.

“Fulfilled in your hearing,” he says. Not just the words falling on their ears and ours; in your *hearing*—your taking them in and responding. He invites us to *hear*, to let the Word enter deeply into our lives and come to life in us. That we may become good news to the poor. Be released from all that holds us captive, that we may bring release, healing and freedom to others, as we await the fulfillment of God's justice and peace.

A dangerous Word. Asks us to step out in new ways as he did. Allow our lives and our common life to be shaped by the power of the Spirit that descended on him, led him into the wilderness to be tested, fills him as he announces his purpose.

A Word that calls for a response. Tears? Rejoicing? “Amen, Amen,” as we lift up our hands to God; hold out our hands to receive the Bread of Life and Cup of Salvation; reach out our hands in love to serve our neighbors, near and far?

How have we heard and responded to the Word in our midst since last we gathered in our Annual Meeting? How might we be called to respond in this new year? As we gather today, we will listen together in community to hear each other's thoughts and insights on these and other matters that go to the heart of our common life.