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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Sunday, January 23, 2022

3 Epiphany, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10](#)

[Psalm 19](#)

[1 Corinthians 12:12-31a](#)

[Luke 4:14-21](#)

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“Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are; up above the world so high.”

“O say can you see, by the dawn’s early light, what so proudly we hailed.”

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found.”

You kind of notice when somebody stops early, don’t you?

Here’s Jesus at the very beginning of his public ministry. This is the first public speech we ever hear him make in the Gospel of Luke. It’s a kind of coming-out party, a moment when he sets out a kind of mission statement for the beginning of his work. It’s an electric moment as he actually proclaims that the scripture is being fulfilled right there in him. He’s the one God has sent to bring good news to the poor and release to the captives.

So he starts by reading this passage from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, chapter 61, not that they used chapter numbers in those days, but that's how we mark it today. He starts the passage: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, 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 then it says, "He rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down." He's done. He's read enough of the text and he's ready to preach on it. So what you might not notice, unless you knew the Isaiah text by heart, is that he's stopped right in the middle of a phrase. The passage from Isaiah reads, "To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, *and the day of vengeance of our God.*"

A lot of Christians of a more evangelical or fundamentalist persuasion often like to say, "You can't pick and choose scripture." Which is true in a sense: all of scripture is inspired and important, and we don't get to just lay aside the parts we don't like without grappling with them and what the Spirit might be saying to us through them. On the other hand, it's also true that *everyone* emphasizes certain themes or passages from scripture at certain times and puts less focus on others. You can't help it if you're trying to live a faithful life guided by God's Spirit today. Faithfully interpreting scripture means discerning how the texts from the past resonate with what God is doing today. And as a prime example, here's Jesus choosing to stop right in the middle of a passage to preach the good news part and leave the vengeance part out.

I think there's something significant here about who Jesus is, and about who God is. A God who chooses to leave the vengeance part out is a God who chooses mercy. A God who's quick to forgive. A God of grace.

Imagine a God who genuinely loves you—and maybe more surprising that that even, a God who genuinely likes you. A God who thinks you're amazing, which is not to say perfect. This God knows exactly how imperfect you are, knows it better than you know yourself. And this God intends to bring you to complete wholeness, in this life and the next. But just as you are now, without changing a thing, this God is crazy about you. That's the God we meet through Jesus Christ. And that's a God profoundly different than the God so many of us think we're supposed to believe in, a God who sits in heaven wagging the divine finger and looking for excuses to smite those who don't measure up.

So Jesus starts his ministry by leaving out the vengeance part. Next week we'll hear how his sermon goes over with his hometown crowd, which is to say that it starts out popular and then gets less so. Which may have to do with the fact that a God who is crazy about us and quick to forgive is great news, but it's not as easy to accept a God who is crazy about our enemies too and quick to forgive them.

Last month the world paid tribute to Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Bishop Tutu in his book *No Future Without Forgiveness* writes about his experience chairing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa. This was a tribunal, similar to so many other war crimes tribunals—but with a difference. Those who had been the victims of atrocities were invited to tell their stories to make as full an accounting as possible of the truth. Those who had been the perpetrators were given the chance to confess what they had done. And for those who did come forward as perpetrators, the opportunity for amnesty: forgoing

prosecution in exchange for honesty about what they had done. In a way it was a choice to preach the good news of liberation while leaving out the vengeance part. Not as an act of sentimentality or weakness, but as a clear-eyed and frankly political choice to try to avoid bloodshed in one of the most profound social transitions in history.

Sometimes we use the word “justice” as a synonym for “vengeance.” A person gets punished or executed and we hear someone say, “Justice has been done.” But there’s a difference between justice and vengeance. Vengeance is about wounding in return where a wound has been given. Vengeance is about wanting the person to suffer who has made us suffer. Vengeance is the cry in one of the Psalms, after God’s people have been taken into exile and slavery by the Babylonians: “Babylon, you destroyer, happy is the one who pays you back for what you’ve done to us! Happy is the one who takes your children and dashes them against the rock!” The craving for vengeance is profoundly human. Yet in Jesus God calls us to move past it, to let go of our need for vengeance. And that’s very different from letting go of our need for justice.

Justice is what Jesus is talking about in this passage when he talks about good news for the poor and freedom for those who have been oppressed. Justice for those who’ve been wounded is good news. Justice for those who have done the wounding can feel like bad news. Because it means accountability: complete accountability. And it means restoration: making amends. Justice is a fearful thing when our privilege or comfort depends on someone else’s oppression because it threatens that privilege and that comfort. But ultimately justice is good news for everyone, not just the wounded but also the perpetrator. Because true justice, God’s justice, brings a chance even for the perpetrator to be restored to life in the truth, no matter how painful and humbling that truth might be, and out of that the hope of a path to life in true community.

The difference between justice and vengeance is the difference between surgery and a knife attack. Both are sharp; both are painful. Both cost something. But one destroys and the other heals.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” Jesus says. “To proclaim release to the captives and sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” May this scripture keep being fulfilled in our hearing, and in our lives.