

Jesus' Epiphany

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Third Sunday after Epiphany – January 24, 2010

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

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We begin with the end of our Psalm for today, which is often used as a prayer before sermons: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of [every] heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, [our] rock and [our] redeemer.”

Today we will focus on an epiphany—an “aha”—that Jesus had when visiting his hometown congregation. But first let me speak about the several epiphanies manifest in the other scriptures for the day, because all relate to Jesus' own epiphany as he reads the prophet Isaiah aloud to his people.

In our readings from Isaiah in recent weeks we've talked about how he was addressing the Israelite exiles returning to Jerusalem after Cyrus conquered the Babylonians who had forced the Israelites into exile throughout the Babylonian empire. There were several waves of exiles who returned, and the third wave was led by the priest and scribe Ezra, who is known for codifying the Law of Moses, while the fourth wave was led by the governor Nehemiah, who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem as well as return purity to the community and its worship, eliminating elements foreign to Judaism.

The books Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book, and our chapter from Nehemiah perhaps more rightly belongs between chapters nine and ten of the book of Ezra, for it describes Ezra reading the Law aloud to the people. The people were so moved that they wept. Our text reads, “So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”

What is meant here is that the law of God was read in Hebrew, and then translated into the language of the people, which was Aramaic, so that they understood: Ezra thus gave them the sense of the reading. But it's not enough to simply translate the words, so as to understand them; their context must be understood as well. This is essentially what a Jewish rabbi or a Christian preacher does when giving background to any given scripture, such as I have just done for our reading from Nehemiah 8. To know that the exiles are returning to their homeland and their home congregation may account for their emotions hearing their scriptures read again. It's like those of us who have felt exiled from our home congregations returning to church and singing a familiar hymn, hearing

a familiar scripture, or receiving Communion again—we may feel deeply moved, even to tears, at the recognition—an epiphany—of something that had been lost to us in our own exile. And we might hear Ezra say to us as he said to the exiles of old, “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep...for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

Our reading from the Psalmist also celebrates the reading of the Law of Moses, singing, “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the [word] of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold: sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.”

Though this is a lovely celebration the Law of Moses, its context tells us that it is an insertion by a later writer who is embarrassed by the pagan-like celebration of creation of the rest of the psalm that begins, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words...yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.” The “aha”—the epiphany—of the original writer of Psalm 19 is that the whole of creation bespeaks God’s presence, proclaiming God’s glory in a sermon without words.

The apostle Paul, once a zealous enforcer of the Law of Moses, describes yet another epiphany in our reading from 1 Corinthians. He sees the church as the Body of Christ in which each of us has our role to play, “If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. ... The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you.’” But the metaphor Paul uses of the church as the Body of Christ is about more than simple diversity: it is the new law, the Law of Christ instead of the Law of Moses. Because we are part of the Body of Christ, our bodies should not do anything that Jesus would find morally wrong: exploitation, infidelity, indifference, betrayal, or exclusion. And the diversity of our gifts as the Body of Christ are to serve the higher purpose of love, described immediately in the chapter that follows, the famous love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. Again, like our other scriptures, to understand the text we heard this morning requires comprehending the context.

So now we finally come to Jesus’ own epiphany, his own “aha.” We have reflected on the epiphany of the exiles returning to their home congregation in Jerusalem. We have considered the epiphany of the Psalmist that all creation sings God’s glory, despite a later editor who inserts a more orthodox celebration of the Law. We have heard the apostle Paul’s epiphany that now our customs and community are derived by our life in Christ as his body in the world.

So what is Jesus' "aha" experience that defines his life and ministry? Well, of course, there are several, as we would expect of a spiritual leader. We remember how he heard God calling him the Beloved at his baptism. We might call to mind how he finally discovered that his mission was not simply to his own people, but also to the Syrophoenician woman, the Roman centurion, and the Samaritan woman at the well. During Lent that begins mid-February we will hear again how he came to understand his Passion as the only way to Resurrection.

But in today's Gospel lesson from Luke, Jesus has an epiphany of his purpose in the world. He goes to his home congregation in Nazareth. Luke reports he's riding high, "filled with the power of the Spirit, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country," teaching throughout Galilee "in their synagogues and ... praised by everyone." An athlete would call it being "in the zone," or what a recent bestseller describes as having *Flow* or optimal experience (by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, HarperCollins). He goes to the synagogue and is handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. But notice what he does: he searches the scroll for just the right text to explain what is being fulfilled in their midst and then reads, "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."

Wow! That's quite a job description. Glad it's not mine! Or is it mine—and yours? Jesus reached back into what is called second or third Isaiah, the spiritually elevated post-exile epiphanies of his people, newly restored to their faith and to their faith community, to discern a mission statement for himself and for us as the Body of Christ: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because God has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. God has sent us 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."

We know what Jesus did with this. His ministry was to the poor. His disciples held a common purse from which the poor freely received. He fed the hungry multitudes, he released people from their infirmities and ailments, he gave sight to the man born blind, he delivered religious outcasts from their roles as untouchables, he challenged the religious elite, he lifted up women and Gentiles, he freed people from sin, and he proclaimed God's inbreaking kingdom.

We know that the first Christians did the same. During worship they collected food to distribute to the poor, setting aside a little bread and wine for Communion. They provided burials for dead infants often left outside the walls of cities. They taught a gospel of equality, regardless of station or nation. They enjoyed the leadership of women as well as men. They forgave one another their sins, and proclaimed God's inbreaking kingdom. They turned the other cheek to their persecutors, resisting returning violence for violence. They became Christ's

body in the world. Others were attracted to Christians because they wanted to be like them, doing good in the world.

What if we were to take this as *our* mission statement as Virginia Highland Church: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because God has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. God has sent us 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.”

First we’d have to ask ourselves a lot of questions. How is the Spirit of the Lord upon us? How do we let the Spirit in? How do we open ourselves to Spirit? How have we been anointed? By virtue of location in this neighborhood? By virtue of our educational or economic backgrounds? By virtue of the gift of this building to the present congregation from those who have gone before us? By virtue of a faith traditioned to us over the centuries?

And who are the poor to whom we might bring good news? Is it only the physically poor or homeless? What about the spiritually impoverished, impoverished either by an unyielding religious literalism, or an unwelcoming religious establishment? Who are the blind whom we can help to recover their sight? What are we ourselves blind to as we look around this sanctuary or around this community—who are we missing, who is our city, state, or federal government failing to recognize, who are the institutions of our society, including the broader church, failing to see?

Who are the captives to whom we might preach deliverance? The captives to consumerism or privilege or style? The captives to “the powers that be” or to “the way things should be”? The captives to the bigotry and prejudice and ignorance of others? Who needs to hear our proclamation of freedom?

And finally, what does the year of the Lord’s favor look like? What does the reign of God mean in how we do business, how we relate to one another, how we vote or lobby our representatives? And does the inbreaking commonwealth of God lift our spirits and our hopes and our dreams, as well as those of others?

These are the kind of soul-searching questions we must ask ourselves when we meet from 9 in the morning till 3 in the afternoon on Saturday, February 27, downstairs in Jones Hall. We are melding together the work of the Pastoral Search team with our own need to consider our call as Virginia Highland Church. If you do nothing else for this church in the month of February, come to this meeting, and encourage one another to attend, because every part of Christ’s body is needed! The theme is from Proverbs, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” As with Communion, “You do not need to be a member of this church or any church to participate.” We need to know why someone is not a member as much as we need to know why someone is a member. And, except

for the needs any institution has to govern itself fairly, we view Virginia Highland Church as the church for anyone who walks through that door, or hesitates on its threshold, or sits on the steps outside debating whether to enter. Please do everything in your power to be there if you have any stake in what becomes of us, who we hire as permanent pastor, or where we go as a congregation.

Much like the ancient Hebrews, we are all returning from exile of one kind or another. With the Psalmist, we have seen the glory of God in creation. Alongside the apostle Paul, we want to recognize our interdependence as members of this Body of Christ, and fulfill his ministry in the world. As Jesus of Nazareth, we want to bring good news, proclaim deliverance, provide insight, free the oppressed, and proclaim God's favor. We want this scripture to be fulfilled in the life, worship, and witness of this congregation. And only you can make it so!