

Message
January 23-24, 2010 – Epiphany III
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21
Be in the Word
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A while back, preacher Ted Ferris wrote a little book named, What Jesus Did. I call it a little book because it is a little book, just 5 ½ x 8 inches and just 130 pages. It's just about 39,000 words. And in those 39,000 words Ferris tells us his passion. He wants us to know Jesus. Not just know about Jesus. But, truly know Jesus, to have a personal relationship with Jesus. And, to know Jesus so we can talk about Jesus to others. Ferris tells us to know Jesus we need to know what Jesus did, what Jesus does. Because when we know what Jesus does, then we can know how Jesus loves and how he teaches us to love. Jesus performs miracles, forgives sins, hangs out with the undesirable, breaks the law, prays, lives and dies for us so that we can live in his name. So, if we're going to know Jesus, my guess is, we want to start exactly where Jesus starts, in the Word; start in Scripture and learn the story; his, story and our story, a story about challenge, change and celebration.

Today's story from the Word tells us about Jesus' homecoming. Jesus is baptized. Filled with the Holy Spirit, and, as one scholar writes, "armed with scripture," having battled the tempter in the desert, he emerges, returning to Galilee, teaching and preaching. Galilee, is an area in the northern region of Palestine with as many as 204 villages densely populated with diverse, innovative people who appreciate change. Consequently, they've embraced non-Jewish influences. But, not Jesus; he stays faithful to his Judaic tradition. He comes to Nazareth. But, not without some apprehension as he admits that *a prophet is not honored in his own home town*. He does what faithful people do. It's the Sabbath. He goes to church; to the synagogue, the center for worship, and learning; where the community gathers for prayer, reading of Scripture, preaching and teaching. A leader, maybe the Vestry Person of the Day, or the senior warden, hands him the scroll to read. Again, armed with scripture, Jesus reveals his story as he reads from the prophet Isaiah words of hope with authority. *The spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed me to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord.* We're reminded that rabbis sit to teach and instruct. As Jesus sits, all are in rapt attention, astonished. Amazingly, the Word is made known, become flesh, made alive in Jesus Christ; now, today, this day, and for every day to come. Before he cleanses the man of the devil, before he relieves the suffering, before he commands simple fishermen to make the catch of a lifetime, before he dines with sinners and calls the twelve,...here's what he does,...he gathers us up, **and he gets us fastened on the Word**. He plants his truth, shapes and fashions us. He tests our thoughts and our attitudes. He promises love, hope and mercy. He challenges, and changes and sends us out, to celebrate his grace as we build his church.

Years ago, I stood on the street of the church where I served, with many fellow church members as we watched horror stricken, with tear stained faces, as the church

building burned, almost to the ground. Fearful of how we would ever once again be the church, we gathered and we prayed. Then, once we saw the fire was under control, not knowing where else to turn, we drowned ourselves in scripture, the words of Isaiah, *The spirit of Lord Yahweh is on me... me. He has sent me to bring the news to the afflicted, to soothe the broken-hearted,...to comfort all who mourn,...They will rebuild the ancient ruins, they will raise what has long lain waste, they will restore the ruined...and everlasting joy will be theirs.* Feeding on the Word, three years later, having learned so much about ourselves and one another, we returned to our rebuilt worship space and gave thanks.

Author Brian McLaren tells us the Bible teaches us what is true and right; gives us direction, helps us see where we've gone wrong, guides and educates. That's how it is with the Israelites in their return from exile in Babylon, in the story we hear today from Nehemiah. Nehemiah is actually part two of the series, Ezra-Nehemiah. The books describe the restoration of the community, the rebuilding of the temple, the wall around Jerusalem and its repopulation. It's a challenging time for the people. While they were in exile, many of the Israelites had forgotten how to practice their faith. Exile isn't so conducive to Bible study, DOCC, EFM, Emmaus groups, small groups and Kid's Quest; and often, when we're in exile worship gets mixed up and we forget what we're worshipping. So, back on their home turf, the Israelites need to be reminded of how God tells them to live. In today's reading, the people are gathered at the Water Gate; one of ten gates within the wall that surrounds and protects holy Jerusalem. The gate is neutral place, an opening where all are invited to gather without discrimination. It's the first day of the seventh month, probably sometime in September or October, a day that's been designated in Leviticus, as a Sabbath day. So, before they enter to start again as Jerusalem, men, women and children, they ask Ezra to read from the Law of Moses, their rule book. They're seeking challenge and change.

It's not always easy to understand scripture. So Ezra asks his lay readers to move around in the crowd and explain what the scripture means. They read and study from morning til noon! When was the last time you've given your rapt attention to something for as long as 6 hours? A football game is three hours at best. These people, gathered with Ezra; not like a marathon rock concert where they come and go. No, these people are riveted; standing, at attention, challenged, listening with all ears. How is it that we're able to pay such close attention with such eagerness? Well, it seems to me that when what we're hearing is about us, is about our story, and how God calls us to live; how to conduct ourselves; how to grow and change for the better, then, my guess is, we're going to pay attention; maybe for as long as six hours, or a day, or a week; or maybe paying attention to the Word is for a lifetime.

The people collapse in a heap, tearful and guilt ridden at what they have not done in these absent years about honoring their God. This is what's so challenging and so amazing, so astonishing about God and the Word. Rather than suffer, says Nehemiah and Ezra and all the helpers, "Do not be sad, today is a sacred to our Lord...go...eat, drink, and send a helping to the one who has nothing. The joy of God is your joy..." Redeemed, grace filled, rejoicing, the people go off, armed

with scripture to celebrate, not just that day, but fastened with the Word, they go out every day, serving and celebrating God's grace!

Recently someone asked me about how it is to prepare for sermons. "I'm grateful for the discipline of being in the Word," I responded. I'm thankful that in the Word, God teaches me the courage of conviction and the promise of love; that I'm challenged to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God; that the angel tells Mary and us that "nothing is impossible with God;" that Jesus calms storms, protecting our darkest thoughts; all the while comforting and calling us his friend; that in the Word we're equipped to be in the world. I'm grateful that my day will go a lot better when I can start the day, early in the morning, in a quiet place, soaked in the Word. Reading whatever the appointed reading is for the week, over and over, I ask Jesus to reveal to me a word or a phrase or an image; to be quiet enough to let those precious words wash over me and teach me to listen, to obey. In the Word, we are challenged, changed and we celebrate!

Be challenged by the Word that Jesus calls ordinary people; people like you and me, who are just doing the best we can; and he gives us power and authority and he expects our very best. Be challenged that Jesus doesn't give us the answers we want. Instead, he gives us what we need. So, our story is changed, looks different. That means extending the party invitation to all, regardless of whether or not they look like us or live in our neighborhood, or see the world the way we see it; it means we praise the crafty dishonest one when he repents; and it means, it's not how much we know and have accomplished that gets us into the kingdom. Instead, Jesus challenges us to be open and wide eyed as a little child to enter the kingdom. In the Word, we learn the truth. Truth is trust in God working in our lives. We rejoice in how he teaches and empowers us and encourages us in our doubting, and for how most of all, he goes to the cross for us, giving his life for us, dying, rising again so that, in him, the Word made flesh, we know him, our salvation.

We celebrate and give thanks that in the Word made flesh, we're challenged to be agents of change and live with generous hearts with our financial resources giving generously to Haiti relief and learning about how to live transformed lived from Nathan Dungan in February. We give thanks and we celebrate for how this community gathers faithfully, cares for one another, loves so deeply, trusts, and builds, builds this new glorious space; but more importantly, goes out, and builds the kingdom in the world, glorifying and blessing his name.

So, I'll finish where we began. Do you want to know Jesus? Get in the Word. Start somewhere. This week, read the lessons appointed. We're in the season of Epiphany. Epiphany means, revealing, making known. Read Luke 4:14-21. Read Nehemiah 8. Read the lessons, every day. What is God revealing to you? Ask, where am I in the story, Lord? Ask, Lord, where are you challenging me and asking me to change in the story? Ask, Lord, how will I celebrate the story this week? Be in the Word; be astonished; be in the know; and be celebrating in the love of Christ as he shines in you.

