

Sermon, Epiphany 3C

Nehemiah 8, Psalm 19, 1Cor 12:12-31, Luke 4: 14-21

January 27, 2019

Bridging the Gap

As people of the 21st century, we live in a world filled with words. They come to us in an endless stream in text and print, in emails, blogs, tweets and subtitles. Words come to us via cell phones and computer screens, on media airwaves or in gossip by the office water cooler. We're inundated by words that seek to persuade us, convince us, manipulate or even deceive us. It can be all so overwhelming...

But I'm convinced that there's something in the human spirit that watches for, leans in, that snaps to attention when certain words are spoken: baby's first word... words used to ask for that prom date... wedding vows and solemn oaths of office... words of apology, words of parting, of final goodbyes and death bed blessings. Words of genuine affection and affirmation: "Well done!" These are the words we long to hear. In a world filled with words, we're starved to hear those that are life-giving, words that bring us hope.

Here in this holy place, in this season after the Epiphany, we continue to hear stories from scripture about the hidden God who nonetheless - reveals God's self to humans. Did you catch the echo reverberating in each of our readings today? In each situation, something of God's Word, God Voice, God's Wisdom, is being communicated. And in each case the listeners have a strong reaction to the revealed Word.

As a result of Paul's coaching, the conflicted congregation of the Corinthian church came together in a unity of passion for the purpose of doing ministry. When Ezra, the priest read from the Torah, the people who returned from exile wept to hear how far they were from God's holy instruction. Our gospel story told us how Jesus' gracious words moved hearts, re-igniting ancient Messianic hopes within his listeners. The hearing of God's Word can bring strong reactions...

Several years ago at my previous church, Good Shepherd Lutheran, during Vacation Bible School, we taught our children words to a song. It quickly became their favorite. I watched as these little ones caught the sense of wonder this song communicates:

Holy Words, long preserved
For our walk in this world
They resound with God's own heart
Oh let the ancient words impart

Refrain:

*Words of Life, words of Hope
Give us strength and help us cope
In this world, where e'er we roam*

Ancient words will guide us home

Ancient words ever true
Changing me and changing you
We have come with open hearts
Oh let the ancient words impart¹

I have to tell you, I was blindsided when I first heard this hymn. Blinking back tears, with a catch in my throat I was completely caught off guard by my reaction. Because, isn't this why we gather every seven days in places of worship? We come with the hope of hearing a Word from God meant just for us, for our lives as individuals, for our lives as a community of God's people. We come to worship, 'leaning in' to listen for a word of meaning.

The Book of Nehemiah is the story of ordinary people under great stress who came together in a common vision to accomplish a major project, according to God's purpose. What a perfect story for us to hear at this transitional time in the life of our congregation!

We remember the fall of Jerusalem 587 years before the time of Christ, its citizens carried off as refugees to Babylonia, where they spent 70 years in exile. By the time King Cyrus had told them they could return home, many had forgotten and some had never learned the words of the Torah that provided the basis of their communal life.

Returning to their homeland was a crushing disappointment. The walls of Jerusalem were in ruins; Solomon's temple was a mound of rubble, and the surrounding countryside a wasteland. A gifted manager named Nehemiah and a scribe named Ezra organized a series of urban renewal projects that included repairing the city walls and re-building a place of worship.

Once the walls were completed and the gates were in place, everyone began to feel a sense of safety. On an appointed day, everyone old enough to understand, including children of a certain age, gathered in the city square. But their situation was bleak. The Persians still dominated and taxed them heavily. External enemies still threatened them. Internal divisions and injustices still set neighbor against neighbor. The people needed guidance and assurance.

Hungry to hear God's Word, they asked Ezra to read the scriptures. Opening an ancient scroll, the scribe began to read its stories – stories of a good creation, of Noah and the ark, of Abraham and Sarah, of Joseph and the coat of many colors, of God releasing the children of Israel from Egyptian captivity, of Miriam and Moses, the 10 Commandments and God's instructions for creating a peaceful and just community.

So the crowd 'leaned in' to listen. These former exiles longed to discover where they were in the story God was writing. They'd wandered so far from God and had forgotten so much about

¹ Michael W. Smith, "Ancient Words," Worship Again Album, Release Date: 10.22.2002

their faith, that there was now a huge gap between the way they were living and the way God wanted them to live. In hearing God's heart for the poor, the orphaned, the widowed and the stranger, a sense of loss and shame overwhelmed them and they broke into tears. But Ezra said, "No, don't grieve; don't weep. This is a day of remembering who we are and who our God is. So go home, prepare a feast – but this time, share it with those who don't have anything. Because this day is holy to God, and the Lord's joy is your strength!"

Nehemiah's account ends with the people celebrating and sharing gifts of food and wine, because their long season of forgetfulness was ended. Their sacred memories were alive again as a result of hearing the scriptures. They could join together in the challenging work that lay ahead assured of God's presence, God's love, God's guidance and God's strength.² And so can we; so can you as the people of God at David Lutheran.

We hear in our scriptures over and over, about communities of people who have a strong reaction to the gracious word they hear in scripture precisely because they become aware of a gap between the way things are – and the way they could be – or need to be – according to God's vision.

Remember the church in Corinth? The divisions in that church were so strong it took not one but two long pastoral letters to set them straight. Right? First and Second Corinthians... Brother Paul had to have been an amazingly patient pastor to persist in caring for and healing such a conflicted congregation! He reminds them that opinions will differ according to the gifts people possess – yet he presses this socially diverse, multi-cultural congregation toward the goal of unity for the purpose of caring for one another – even while they reach out to others with the Good News of God's redeeming love.

Our gospel reading tells us that Jesus, 'filled with the power of the Spirit,' begins teaching in the region, bringing Good News – not first to the most savvy, not to the market segment with the highest margin of disposable income, not to the wealthy, the beautiful or the highly educated – but to the poor, the captive, the outcast and the oppressed. And this is amazingly good news for all of us! Jesus, who is powerful, says that he comes for us, all of us, especially when we're powerless. And this message is still counter-cultural according to the world's understanding of power. His way of being in our world challenges our ingrained cultural assumptions of power as a means of control over others. The power of God at work in Jesus pushes us to re-orient our attention away from ourselves – to those around us. Jesus' sermon tells us that when the Holy Spirit's power is at work in and through us, this power is not found in any accomplishments or attributes we claim as our own. God's power is expressed only through what it accomplishes for others. Power is only power when it sets others free, only when it builds up others, when it's used for the betterment of those around you.³

² The Rev. David Jones, "Everything Depends On Remembering," 2010.

³ David Lose, "Compassion," Epiphany 3C, www.davidlose.net, January 2016.

It is our continuing ministry to share the message of this Good News. Jesus sends us out every day to tell others that God's forgiveness, love, and redemption from the powers of destruction is available to all people, everywhere.

Let's pray: *Gracious God, you call us as your church and as your people to join with your Son in bridging the gap between the way things are in our wounded world, and the way they need to be. Lead us as a congregation as we begin the work of this holy time to address the current gaps in our community. We place ourselves before you, trusting that you have uniquely gifted, called and empowered each one of us to serve as gracious messengers of your Good News in all the places you will send us during this coming week. All this we pray, trusting in the name of the Savior we love, our Lord Jesus, Amen.*