



Third Sunday after the Epiphany

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene Ian Hicks

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

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of *your* faithful and *kindle* in us the fire of *your* love.

Some time ago, I talked about Don, who lost his home in the Medical Lake fire. When our team met him, he was sitting despondently on a bucket, cleaning the few tools he had been able to salvage from the charred remains of his home. Understandably, he looked miserable. He also asked us to keep a lookout for a locket which had been on the dresser in their bedroom – it contained memories of his wife's late mother. While mucking out the basement, one of our team found that locket, all dirty and scuffed, but intact. Don was so very excited, and we were told his wife was simply overcome with joyful emotion.

The next morning Don arrived at the site and brought us coffee and donuts as a way of saying thank you for our efforts. He had just lost everything, yet, in his graciousness, he wanted to say thank you. A heartfelt thank you. What an emotional moment to try comprehending the positive impact we were having on Don and his wife, but it also simply lifted our own hearts to realize just how much our efforts meant to them! Simply put, God's grace shone through with all of us. Do remember several St. Luke's folks also had the graciousness to assist in Medical Lake.

We all occasionally experience trying circumstances. Sometimes we feel quite powerless, wishing these challenges would simply disappear. They can even seem so bleak to us at the time that we might often feel overwhelmed. And yet, in this time of just having experienced Epiphany, the incredibly powerful promise we can take from today's readings is that no matter what, we too can emerge from the challenges we face and be reinvigorated by the word of God and God's grace in our lives. We are each able to choose to create a positive aura around us.

Emotions. We are emotional creatures. We laugh. We get excited. We jump for joy. We squeal with delight. Sometimes we are sad and tear up. Emotions. We cannot always control them, but we can choose to be positive, or we can choose to be pessimistic.

In Nehemiah, we heard that the Israelites were overcome with joy and wept openly. We may wonder what was behind their emotions.

They had gathered in the square in front of the Water Gate in Jerusalem. The Water Gate is on the east side of Jerusalem, close to the Gihon Spring and other water sources that supplied the rebuilt city.

King Nebuchadnezzar of Mesopotamia had invaded Judah and in 597 the elite of Judah were exiled to Babylonia. The poor, the sick, the elderly were not seen as a threat, so they stayed behind. Neither were farmers nor laborers exiled. After all, even occupiers needed food to be grown and harvested. Jerusalem was destroyed and the Great Temple of Solomon destroyed around 586. This resulted in even more people being exiled. In exile, the people were forbidden to practice Judaism for 70 years and those who had not been exiled were forbidden to practice Judaism for 50 years.¹ People were simply not allowed to gather and hear the words of the Torah (the law of Moses) as a community.

King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return to Israel in 536 and over time, they rebuilt Jerusalem. Their Rosh Hashanah Service – the first day of the 7th month - began with Ezra the Scribe reading the entire Torah as it then was.¹ He also explained the meaning of the readings, so that people could understand. In other words, Ezra gave an explanatory sermon.

People were overcome with joy and wept openly. Why? They had been forbidden to gather and hear the Law of Moses for decades. And now they could gather! Some of them had never heard the Law of Moses read since they were born of parents in exile. Imagine how excited you and I would be if reading the scriptures was banned, then finally we are allowed to gather as a community group again and hear the Word? Celebrate the Word. For the Israelites, this was their first time hearing the word in a long, long time. This was their shared experience. Nehemiah and Ezra encouraged the people to rejoice and celebrate this wonderfully exciting holy moment, by feasting and drinking wine and through sharing their blessings with the less fortunate. They certainly were on an emotional high. They were no different from what we do today – how often do we celebrate good news, or accomplishments over a good meal and drinking, enjoying our emotional high?

In this story, Nehemiah is pointing us towards an acknowledgment of the importance and effectiveness of interpretation in the encounter with Holy scripture.

Despite all their excitement, history reveals that the elite weren't so keen on being fully accepting of those who had remained behind. It was wonderful for them to be able to worship together again, but possibly on their terms only.

In Corinthians, Paul wrote of Jesus' message of complete inclusion. Simply put, we all have a part to play in the body of God. Evidently Paul observed some exclusivity was continuing in the early Christian community. "God appointed apostles, prophets, teachers, gifts of power, healing, assistance, leadership and tongues." Then, as now, we should all be striving for the use of our individual gifts to benefit the greater good. "Each one of us is a member of the body of Christ, and we are the body of Christ. We were all made to drink of one Spirit." Simply put, everyone means everyone. We all have different roles, different capabilities, different ideas, different approaches to a challenge. But "... (we) are the body of Christ and individually members of it." In Christ we are all equal.²

The Gospel tells us of Jesus attending the Sabbath worship at the synagogue in Nazareth. This was his first worship leadership in his hometown. The people who heard Jesus were enthralled. Upbeat. Jesus had just endured 40 days of temptation in the desert, so we can be sure he was certainly upbeat, simply brimming with the Holy Spirit. Some people expressed surprise that he was Joseph the carpenter's son. (Our hometown audience can be our toughest critics!) Jesus was proclaiming his mission in the town where he grew up, coming for the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed.

Emotionally the hometown folk were on a high. Jesus' teaching continued and advised people they were not the only ones chosen by God. In fact, certain prophets had ignored the chosen ones so they could heal specific individuals, people not of the house of Judah! Jesus' audience recoiled, probably with shock and horror and became indignant at this. You are doubting my righteousness?? How dare you! In a heartbeat they turned; now they were so infuriated they wanted to hurl him over a cliff. Emotions, one moment a high and the next visceral anger because they were being questioned or challenged about their righteousness. Jesus was laying bare the subtle sins of their hearts. The message that Jesus was delivering is that it was time for God's favor to fall upon all people. And just as Jesus challenged them that first day in Nazareth, He still challenges us today!

Jonathon Davis wrote "(The) beautifully broad love of God will not be possessed. It will not be contained. It belongs to no one. But is given for all. That is Jesus' truth."²

Renowned scholar and author Marcus Borg noted four prominent characteristics of Jesus:

Jesus was a teacher of alternative wisdom – he had a way of looking at things that turned conventional wisdom upside down, which challenged the status quo.

Jesus was a social prophet. He took a good hard look at the world around him, his society and culture. He saw barriers that kept people segregated by social categories such as religion, ethnic group and gender. He offered ways to live that broke down barriers.

The spiritual life Jesus invites us to follow is his example of prayer, meditation, scripture reading and being still to hear what God had to say.

Jesus the movement founder. In His lifetime people were drawn to what he had to offer. He developed a following. But the continuing eternal presence of Christ-spirit stirred a full-fledged movement that continued beyond Jesus' human life and gained momentum. That was a movement of people drawn to the vision of alternative wisdom and a society marked by inclusiveness. It eventually became a religion.³

Jesus entrusted his vision to his disciples. He entrusts the vision to us. He involves us. He called his disciples to be his witness "to the ends of the earth," and he invites us to follow him and calls us to carry out the work of his movement to the ends of the earth.

In the words of Bishop Budde on Tuesday this past week: "May God grant us the strength and courage to honor the dignity of every human being, to speak the truth to one another in love and walk humbly with each other and our God for the good of all people, the good of all people in this nation and the world."

In the Collect this morning we asked God to:
give us grace to answer readily the call.
proclaim to all people the Good News; and to
perceive the glory of his marvelous works.

Let's finish with the Prayer of the Farmworker's Struggle, written by Cesar Chavez:

Show me the suffering of the most miserable; so I will know my people's plight.
Free me to pray with others; for you are present in every person.
Help me take responsibility for my own life; so I can be free at last.
Grant me the courage to struggle for justice; for in such struggle there is true life.
Give me honesty and patience; so that I can organize our community.
Bring forth song and celebration; so that the Spirit will be alive among us.
Let the Spirit flourish and grow; so that we will never tire of the struggle.
Let us remember those who have died for justice; for they have given us life.
Help us to love even those who hate us; so we can change the world.⁴ Amen

1) Rabbi Howard A. Berman, Emmanuel Episcopal Church in the City of Boston, January 21, 2007

2) Barbara Brown Taylor, quoted by Jonathon Davis, in his sermon February 3, 2013

3) Quoted by Rev. Kelly Love, Davis United Methodist Church, January 25, 2015

4) Cesar Chavez, Labor leader and civil rights activist. UFW Founder (1927-1993) Prayer of the Farm Workers' Struggle