

Epiphany 3C-RCL-2022

January 23, 2022—At Church of the Advent, Hatboro

By the Rev. Naz Javier, Priest-in-Charge

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

*As we draw near to you, O God: may your Word be the wisdom spoken; may your Word be the message heard; may your Word be light to guide us as you also send us into the world. In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. (cf. Deuteronomy 5:27)*

1. With travel being limited domestically—and mostly by car—especially during the first summer of the pandemic, it's hard not to notice how much in need of maintenance our roads were. You've probably heard of major bridges collapsing in the Midwest where several people died. More locally, you hear and see pictures of rusted and corroding overpass trestles. As humans, we like to build—from the great ancient monuments of Egypt, to medieval cathedrals, to the humblest teepee, to the poshest of tiny houses or van conversions, it's as if building and infrastructure is in our blood!
2. It may seem odd, at first, to speak of building and infrastructure, at the start of our reflection today, but I can assure you it's an apt starting point, especially given our First Lesson today. I know it may sound like a broken record, but the bulk of what we now know as the Hebrew Scriptures took a more formal shape after the return from Babylon; and it's not surprising, even as we think about our own experience with the pandemic. One of the casualties of crisis—be that the Babylonian exile of ancient times or the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, or the pandemic we're currently enduring—is the initial loss and eventual re-grounding of our sense of community and to a larger degree, of our culture—that is, culture being those threads that we often take for granted, but, in reality, binds us together and forms a backbone to our shared identity.
3. Our First Lesson narrates for us the somewhat historical fact of the rediscovery of the scroll of the Law sometime in the fourth century before the common era. I propose to us that this narrative lays down the groundwork for our understanding the contemporary lessons of today's Scriptures for us; and that groundwork is this: that our identity as believers—our identity as a people of faith, a people who claim to participate not just in the secular world order but also in the Kingdom of

Jesus Christ—necessarily builds upon three key ingredients: first, **that we are rooted in and renewed by the Word**; second, **that we rely on the guidance of the Spirit**; and third, **that that our renewal in the Word and our guidance by the Spirit shapes our relationship with one another and the community about us**. Put together, these, then shape not just our identity and our essence but also forms how we can magnify the light of Christ in the world—how we, like the Magi, that began our Epiphany season, can go to our destinations by a very different route!

4. Some items worth noting from the First Lesson are the community's reading of the Word together; their collective interpretation, or, some might say, re-interpretation; and their collective celebration and feasting. I thought it important to bring these themes before us because they attest to very important aspect of our life of faith: **that our life of faith, though deeply personal is equally deeply communal**. Our affirmation of faith in God is not just a matter of nurturing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, but is also hearing the Word, digesting the Word and acting on the word (and even testing the ensuing faith) in the company of others. And there's a purpose this: **to help ensure that the commitment is supported by (and, perhaps, even healthily challenged by) others who make a similar personal commitment**.
5. You've probably heard of how, when we speak of terrorists of different stripes especially after 9/11, how many will say that they are "lone wolves," or how they have been "self-radicalized,"—the implication being they delved into the certain aspects of what is intended to be a communal experience on their own, and unchecked by the larger body that can serve as form of "checks and balance." The same way can be said for those, I suppose, who tend to perpetuate conspiracy theories—these tend to develop when something that is intended to be consumed and validated by the whole gets misinterpreted, even confused, by the few. The fact that we're reflecting on this text and bringing our contemporary circumstances beside them is, in itself, a mirroring of what took place nearly 5,000 years ago: a thankful people read the Word of God together; and together, they reflected and discerned on how that timeless Word impacts the particular circumstances of their contemporary life.
6. Between the ancient narrative of Nehemiah and our contemporary experience lays the experience of Jesus. Of note in Jesus' experience—lest

we forget that Jesus' divinity is always coupled with his humanity—is the fact that as a Jewish person, Jesus followed the pattern of weekly synagogue worship. We won't get into how the people reacted to proclamation and interpretation we heard today from Luke (that's for next week); but I think it's worthwhile for us to be grounded in the fact that our pattern of worship (in the portion of the service that we call the "Ministry of the Word," is not so foreign to what Jesus would have experienced!

7. But beyond identifying with Jesus' worship experience, the passage from Luke informs us of that second element of our identity: **that we are inheritors of and are guided by the Spirit of the Lord.** Luke places the words of the 61<sup>st</sup> chapter of the Prophet Isaiah on Jesus' lips as the prologue to his earthly ministry—his keynote address, if you will. What is most striking for us in this passage is perhaps not so much Jesus' recitation of the well-known words of the prophet; but, instead, his proclamation that, *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* It's a bold claim—and we should not underestimate its power even now. What it told them—and what it tells us—is **the fact that being given the Holy Spirit (and all of us have received her at our Baptism), we are empowered by her to do what God desires for the world; and that we're empowered do that at this very moment.** Yes; there's planning that needs to happen; but the "today" in Jesus' words reminds us of the urgency of his mission; and the urgency of our participation in that mission. Walter Burghardt whose sermon was quoted in the text I shared with our Bible Study group, said this, *"The time of God's Holy Spirit is today, right now. It is the Holy Spirit speaking when you hear God whisper to you: "Child of God, live this day as if it were your first day, as if it were your last day, as if it were your only day."* Besides a sense of urgency or immediacy—it also speaks of a paradoxical **humble confidence** that we can have: we can be humble because we know our place (to supply the heavy-lifting); we can be confident because the agenda is already set before us (good news to the poor, release to captives; sight to the blind; freedom for the oppressed; the Lord's favor to all!). The guidance of the Spirit in our lives of faith remind us of the urgency of God's work; and also helps us respond to that urgency by pointing us to the direction of our mission.
8. Renewed by worship and led on by the Spirit, we face our third key ingredient to our life of faith—how we relate to one another; and this likely

comes as no surprise that for this ingredient we draw our inspiration from the Epistle. In our current sensibilities, we're bombarded with narratives and cults of fame and importance making it appear that certain persons count more than others. But the way of Jesus tells us that **our importance and value does not reside in external status but in our essential nature as God's beloved and also in our relationship to one another**; and I say essential because I want to underscore that at the heart of Paul's Epistle today is the essence of relationship. Let's face it, body parts are useless and of themselves. Everyone who has "organ donor" stamped in their driver's license knows that. In the larger scheme of things, our identity is only formed in relationship one to another—CEOs are only as important because they have organizations that depend on their leadership; the cook is only as important as there are people who will consume the raw materials s/he transforms with his culinary skills. I think you get the point. Paul's message is especially relevant now because, like it or not, we exist more and more in a disembodied world. What I mean by that is this: we exist in a world where our lives are reliant on talking heads, forgetting that the opinions shared there can impact the very physical reality of people, real people who care for others and upon whom others depend.

9. And when I refer to talking heads, I just don't mean folks we see on screen. Several years ago, as part of my work as social worker in a community-based AIDS service organization, it was part of our calendar to go up to Capitol Hill and to the State Legislature. If ever you've been to the Hill or to the any State House, you'll know that there are multiple layers of security; not to mention multiple layers of staffers that you need to get to before you actually meet face-to-face with a legislator. I could not help but think in one of those trips how seemingly disconnected the place was—the steps, the marble, the staffers, the security... and our group had someone arrange for the meeting... what would it be like for those who potentially represent the "less honorable" parts that Paul refers to. What it might be like for them? What it might be like for those who find themselves in different levels of voicelessness both historical and existential!
10. Epiphany is our season to discern the many manifestations of Jesus in our journey of faith. It is also our time to discern how best to lead others to the light WHO IS Jesus. Today we are reminded that for us to be counted among the "brightest and best of the stars of the morning," we need to be

nurtured by the Word; we need to be led by the Spirit; we need to value one another as partners in our journey back to God. May incorporating these to our daily life be our intention each and every day.

11. To the God who calls us to partake of the life of his Son so that the world might hear and witness his Good News: to this God be glory and honor now and forever. AMEN.