

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

Well, here we are nearly halfway through the Season of the Epiphany. Between The Feast of the Epiphany on January 6 when the Magi arrive at the stable until the end of the season which is the Sunday before Ash Wednesday and the beginning of Lent, there are 8 Sundays. We go from finding out who Jesus is to preparing for his death in a matter of a few weeks. If we aren't careful, we can find ourselves struggling with a bit of spiritual whiplash!

Epiphany is the Season of revelation. As we travel through the Season of Epiphany, we are given multiple vignettes that reveal the true nature of Jesus as the Son of God. Actually, we are shown who Jesus really is from the beginning. We get a hint of that even before he arrives in his Mother Mary's Song, the Magnificat. The first people to learn about Jesus are the shepherds in the fields. They are told by the angels about Jesus' arrival and who Jesus is. So, they are the first. When Mary and Joseph present Jesus at the Temple when he is eight days old, a man named Simeon ran into them. Simeon was a devout and quite elderly man, full of the Holy Spirit. God had promised him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah, the Savior and Redeemer of Israel. As soon as he held the baby Jesus in his arms, he knew that God had indeed kept the promise and had let him see the Messiah and he was then ready for his life to end. At the same time, a prophetess named, Anna, was in the Temple. The moment she saw the infant Jesus, she began praising God and telling everyone looking for the redemption of Jerusalem about this infant.

We hear again when Jesus is 12 years old about the family pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. When his parents leave with the rest of the extended family and friends, Jesus stays behind. After three days, his parents finally realize he is not with the family and they head back to Jerusalem to find him. When they find him in the Temple he is sitting among the teachers listening to them and asking questions. When his parents chide him for lagging behind, Jesus simply replies, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Is Jesus beginning to understand himself exactly who he is?

Fast forward to Jesus when he is nearly 30 and is baptized by John the Baptist and begins his ministry. When he comes up out of the water and the dove descends on him, Jesus is identified by a disembodied voice that says, "You are my son, the Beloved; in you I am well-pleased." He has been filled with the Holy Spirit from top to toe. And he begins his work...his ministry...his

mission...by wrestling with the devil in the wilderness for forty days and nights. In an arm wrestle with evil, Jesus wins...every time! He emerges from the wilderness ready to begin his ministry and his mission.

He travels around Galilee, fortified by the Holy Spirit and he begins by teaching in their synagogues and he was praised by everyone. It seems only natural that he should want to return to his hometown to pursue his ministry, so after a short while he heads toward Nazareth. That's where we find him in today's gospel lesson.

Back in his hometown, Jesus follows the customs and traditions that he was raised with. On the Sabbath, he goes to the local synagogue. It seems pretty obvious to us that by now, Jesus himself knows who he is. He knows what he's all about. He knows why he has been sent to live among human beings and he knows what his mission is. In the synagogue, it was customary to invite a guest to read from a prophetic scroll and to comment or preach on it. The scroll of Isaiah is handed to Jesus and he searches for exactly the passage that he wants to read. It is Isaiah's description of the Messiah. It is God's promise to Israel delivered by Isaiah. It is Isaiah 61:1-2

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
Because the Lord has anointed me;
He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
To bind up the broken-hearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And release to the prisoners;
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,”

When he had finished reading, he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down which was customary for those who were going to teach or provide commentary in the synagogue. That last line, “to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” is a reference to the Year of Jubilee described in Leviticus 25:10:

“And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you to your property and every one of you to your family.”

The Year of Jubilee was designated as the year when God would restore everything to its rightful place and everyone to their rightful place. Those who had sold land; it would be redeemed; those who had sold themselves into slavery because of debt would be redeemed. In

the Year of Jubilee all debts would be forgiven; all mistakes would be corrected; all injustice would be put right. God would fix it all.

Jesus has just read this portion of Isaiah to the community gathered on the sabbath in the synagogue. They knew all too well about the Year of Jubilee. Jesus has sat down to begin his teaching and his commentary. And he has just one sentence to say:

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

BOOM.

This statement is eschatological. This is happening TODAY...not on some far off date...some distant time in the future. This is happening NOW...in your hearing. You do not have to wait any longer. The Messiah has arrived! And you are looking at him.

It would be safe to assume that Jesus, himself, is announcing who he is. Jaws must have dropped all over the room! Every good Jew is familiar with the Year of Jubilee and every good Jew is familiar with the passage from Isaiah that describes God’s promise of a coming Messiah. They all know the implications of this particular piece of scripture from the Prophets.

In effect, Jesus has just said,

“I’m the one! I’m the one you’re waiting for. I’m the one you’re looking for.”

And Jesus has just outlined his Mission Statement. Not only has God anointed him, but God has sent him

-To bring good news to the poor; any kind of poor; poor in spirit, poor in resources, poor in social standing, poor in self-esteem, poor in peace of mind...any kind of poor.

-to proclaim release to the captives; whatever it is that holds you prisoner; a relationship; a job; a situation over which you have no control; others’ expectations...any kind of captivity.

-to recover the sight of the blind; any kind of blindness; those unwilling to see facts that refute a long-held prejudice; those who cannot see the goodness or dignity in another person; those who have no insight about themselves; those who cannot see because it will be inconvenient if they do.

-and to let the oppressed go free; any kind of oppression; anything that interferes with the power to make decisions about one’s own life and act accordingly; anything that prevents a person from being able to function as a full member of society;

Jesus’ Mission statement is quite specific. He doesn’t talk in generalities about what he will do; he outlines specifically what he will do. And he is probably speaking metaphorically as well as literally.

This is what we need to do as the body of Christ in the world. We need to discover and own who we are. We need to outline what we will do as the body of Christ in the world. We need to be specific not only about what we will do, but about how we will do it. It takes much thought and many prayers and all our voices.

Several years ago our Vestry got enthused about crafting a new Mission Statement and a new Vision Statement so that we could define ourselves more clearly: who we are and what we intend to do. It was a harder task than we realized. It took several meetings and a mountain of prayer to arrive at a new Mission Statement, but if you look at your bulletin for this Sunday, you can see what the Vestry crafted.

We pattern our lives individually and collectively around Jesus Christ. If we ever need advice about when or how or whether or not we should do something, we can rely on the fact that we can find what we are looking for in prayer...both private and corporate. God has promised that he would never abandon us. He sent Jesus to live among us to emphasize the commitment. We have a dependable and reliable source of strength and power just waiting for us to tap into it. The Holy Spirit is still among us. It always has been and it always will be. If ever we feel lost or without direction, all we need to do is ask God to provide us with that direction...even if it means being hit with a two by four. And sometimes, that's just what we need.

God is always listening. God is always guiding. God is always healing us. God is always offering sight to us. God is always providing us with energy. God is always loving us. God is always pointing the way.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.