



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Heard Any Good News Lately? Nehemiah 8:1-10; Luke 4:14-21

A homegrown boy returned to town. It was a difficult time for the Hebrew people of Nazareth and for Jews living throughout Palestine. Their temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt but their nation had constantly been the victim of conquering armies. Roman soldiers patrolled the streets of the city and roads meandering through the plains and hills of Judea. The government was oppressive and, even worse, the authority of religious leaders in Jerusalem was stifling. Life was hard and challenging. Jesus entered the synagogue in which he had learned the Torah and sang the songs of his faith. He was invited to read the scripture lesson of the day. He took the scroll of Isaiah which was handed to him and found the passage which you heard read a few minutes ago.

“Good news for the poor!” he announced, and the people sat up and listened closely. “I have come to proclaim release to the captives,” he declared with a smile, and folks glanced at one another. “I have come to help the blind recover their sight,” he said with an energized voice. “I have come to let the oppressed go free,” he exclaimed. “I have come to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” he cried out. “Today, this prophecy is fulfilled in your hearing,” he shouted, and all the people clapped and cheered and reminded each other what a fine young man he was and how they had known him as a boy and knew his family. “He can read the scripture like nobody else,” they all said, and everyone agreed that he would go far in life.

When things had quieted down, Jesus rolled up the scroll and handed it back to the attendant. He looked at them all and said quietly, “You are going to tell me to heal myself and ask me to heal you like you have heard I have done in other towns. But I want you to know that God’s good news is not for you alone. In the past God blessed foreigners before he blessed your ancestors. This good news is not for you alone.”

Suddenly the shocked silence turned to muttered disbelief which grew into angry threats. The congregation rose up and pushed him out of the synagogue through the dusty streets to the outskirts of town where the mob threatened to shove him off the cliff. Like the hero in an old western, Jesus

quietly looked them in the eye, parted them with his steady and determined walk, and passed through, leaving them only with the dust from his sandals.

Heard any good news lately? It often feels like good news is missing in action. So much of the news we hear on cable and network TV and radio stations, read in our newspapers, online newsfeeds, and social media platforms is not good news. So much of what we hear is disheartening, frustrating, maddening, frightening, or just plain sad.

We feel the weight of it all. Globally, fighting and death continue in Syria, Afghanistan, and other parts of the Middle East. Venezuela is in an uproar over who is the rightful leader. Tensions grow between nations like the United States, China, North Korea, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Russia. In our nation the shutdown of key parts of government persisted for over a month. Hundreds of thousands of people worried about making rent or mortgage payments, putting food on the table, keeping the lights on and the house warm. Closer to home, newspaper headlines declared a crisis in our city government and, without clear information and strong leadership, citizens have begun choosing sides. At home, at this home—our home—concerns over financial constraints and ministry needs grow urgent. Heard any good news lately?

Earlier we heard the story of an exiled Hebrew named Ezra. Ezra was descended from Aaron, Moses' brother, and was himself a priest and a scribe, well versed in the Torah, the law of God. King Artaxerxes of Persia, the empire that had long before conquered Jerusalem and taken many of the Hebrew people back to exile in Babylon, sent Ezra home to encourage social and religious reforms. Life in Jerusalem was severe and Ezra felt the weight of the people's grief as they felt exiled at home without a temple in which to worship and without the spiritual leadership to guide them back to right relationship with God.¹

Ezra assembled the people in the city center where he read and explained the written word of God to the people. They listened attentively. They asked questions and Ezra and others patiently helped them understand what they were hearing. For six hours the Torah was read and interpreted. Feeling the power of the law and the weight of their own failure to follow it, the people were bowed with grief and wept with contrition. Ezra, however, told

¹David A. Smith, "Ezra-Nehemiah," *Mercer Commentary on the Bible*, Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, gen. eds., (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), 380-81.

them to lift their heads and rejoice for God had given them the Torah as a gift. They were to go home, feast, and celebrate for God was with his people!

Heard any good news lately? Perhaps, but we might not have realized it was good news. In the midst of so much bad news, like the people of Nazareth, we might be letting the good news pass by!

These two stories—of Jesus speaking in his hometown synagogue and Ezra reading scripture in the center of Jerusalem—are all about good news. The good news is that God is with us. The good news is that the foundation of our faith provides all that we need to find the good news day by day. The good news is that our faith is built upon God’s universal guidelines for living. The good news is that all that we need to guide us in living well together is provided by God. The good news is that we have not only the written word to guide us, we also have the Living Word—Jesus Christ—to show us how to live!

What is wonderful about these two stories is the interplay of the written Word and the Living Word. When Ezra read the written word, people wept because they had ignored it and failed to live as God had directed them. But Ezra told them to dry up their tears and go home and rejoice because that day was a new day and an opportunity to live as God desires.

When Jesus read the written word in his home synagogue, the people were delighted. But when he interpreted that word for them not only by his words but by his life, they became enraged and threatened to kill him—which other people successfully did three years later. When we keep God’s guidance in a book which we think is no longer relevant to our needs and circumstances, we balk at any attempts to apply those words to our lives today. Not only did Jesus read and proclaim good news to the people of Nazareth, he embodied that good news. He was the good news. And they almost killed him for it!

The Greek word for crisis indicates a situation in which there is “judgment, parting, estrangement, [and] separation.”² There is also the sense that what has been breached or what is needed is a sense of what is right and just for the people involved.

²Kelly Miller Smith, *Social Crisis Preaching: The Lyman Beecher Lectures 1983*, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984), 33.

There was a crisis in Jerusalem during the exile and Ezra did what was needed to remind people of what is just and right for everyone. There was a crisis in Nazareth and throughout Palestine when God sent Jesus to demonstrate for us what is just and right. There are many crises in our midst today, is God trying to tell us what is just and right?

An old Yiddish tale might help illustrate what often happens to us when we attempt to address the crises in our lives and in our world:

A poor devout woman lived with her husband, their five children, and her mother in a one-room hut. The children were noisy, and the crowded conditions often produced loud arguments. In the summer, when the family spent many hours outdoors, life was bearable, but when winter arrived the family felt trapped because the small house was filled with crying and quarreling. One day when the woman couldn't stand it anymore, she ran to the Teacher for advice.

"Teacher," she cried, "life is miserable. My husband, our five children, my mother, and I are so crowded in our little hut that we argue and quarrel every day. I can't stand the noise anymore. Please help me. I'll do whatever you say."

The Teacher pondered her request for several minutes. Then he asked, "Do you have any chickens?"

"Certainly," the woman replied. "We have six chickens, a rooster, and a goose."

"Excellent," said the Teacher. "Go home and bring the chickens, the rooster, and the goose into your hut to live with you."

The woman was surprised, but she immediately left for home, promising to move the poultry into the house.

After a week passed, the woman returned to the Teacher. "Life is worse than before," she told the teacher. "In addition to crying and quarreling, we now have honking, crowing, and clucking. Yesterday we all had feathers in our soup. The hut seems smaller and the children seem larger. Please help me!"

The Teacher considered the woman's words before he spoke. "Do you have a goat?" he asked.

"Yes," she said slowly. "We have an old goat, tied to a pole behind out house."

"Excellent," said the Teacher. "Untie the goat and let it live in your hut with you."

“Teacher, we are already crowded,” the woman cried.

“You did ask for my help, didn’t you?” the Teacher responded.

The poor woman walked home, untied the goat, and brought it in the hut. Five days later she returned. “Teacher,” she said desperately, “everything is worse. Now, in addition to the crying, quarreling, honking, crowing, and clucking, we have a goat pushing and butting everyone with his horns. The hut seems even smaller.”

The Teacher asked, “Do you have a cow?”

“Yes,” the woman said fearfully, “we have a cow.”

“Go home and take the cow into your hut.”

“Oh, no, Teacher,” the woman cried. “My family will be angry.”

“Tell them the Teacher has ordered it.”

The poor woman went home and told her husband to move the cow into the hut.

“Is the Teacher crazy?” he shouted.

Still, they moved the cow into the hut.

Three days later the woman returned. Life is a nightmare,” the woman cried. “Now, in addition to the crying, quarreling, honking, crowing, clucking, and butting, the cow tramples everything. We all argue and shout at one another. Help me, please!”

The Teacher smiled. “Go home and let the animals out of your hut.”

The woman turned and went home as fast as she could run. As she ran she yelled, “Thank you, Teacher, thank you.”³

Sometimes we have to get back to the basics of life to remember how we are to live well together. Sometimes we have to clear out all of those other things that we bring into our lives, all of the presuppositions, prejudices, and misinformation that crowd in upon us. We need to get rid of the wrong ideas that make life unbearable for us and make it much more difficult for us to make right decisions. We need to clear out all of those things that are suffocating our life and realize that the basic needs we have, the people for whom we care, the people who are part of our community are what matter most.

³“It Could Always Be Worse,” Yiddish Folktale in *Stories for the Gathering: A Treasury for Christian Storytellers*, William R. White, ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1977), 126-27.

We began worship with the prayer, “The kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Come, Lord, and open in us the gates of your kingdom.” God calls us to live together with justice and peace which will result in joy. Jesus declared the Good News which had been proclaimed and written for centuries. He announced good news for the poor, release for captives, recovery of sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the year of the Lord's favor for us all! Through the written word and the Living Word, we discover anew the truly good news which helps us discover good news all around us. In order for us to live with justice and truth, in peace and joy, we must clear out all of those things that are extraneous, all of those things that do not belong in our house, in our hearts. We must let the true Living Word of God which reflects the written word of God to live through us so that gates of God's kingdom are open to all people. Amen.

January 27, 2019

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

It is true, O God, that when troubles rise, we hasten to your throne of mercy and ask for help. It is also true, that when things are good, when all is well, we do not always pause to offer thanks or stop to listen for guidance. The truth is we always need you and, somewhere deep within our souls, we are always grateful for your care of us. Thank you, O God, for loving us no matter what.

Thank you for the moments this past week when something small caught our attention and we smiled. Thank you for the awareness that when things are really bad for us or we are terribly worried you are already moving to meet our need. Thank you for gifts, large and small, that always come our way. And thank you for the privilege of serving you and sharing your love with one another.

Because troubles do rise in our lives, we pray for your help. Continue to bless those of us who are ill with medical expertise, effective medications, and the care of people who love us. Surround those of us who grieve for whatever reason with encouragement and hope. Open doors for those of us who are exploring new opportunities in life and help us when we need to close other doors that lead to places we need not go. Bless us all with moments of understanding and inspiration which will help us to better understand ourselves and to draw closer to you.

Gather us into your goodness, O God, and grant us your peace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.