

Last Sunday and this Sunday are a study in contrasts, both in weather and in Scripture texts. Last Sunday was bitterly cold, well below 0 in the base temperature and even more dramatic in terms of wind chill. I was actually very impressed by how many of us made it to church. To make up for the cold, though, we had a wonderfully inspiring Gospel text, the text where Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding in Cana in the Gospel of John, chapter 2. It's a miracle story that points to how the presence of Christ makes the ordinary sweet, and there is a spirit of fun and festivity to the tale. We noted that this is how Jesus begins his recorded public ministry in the Gospel of *John*. Quite a career launch.

This morning, in contrast, it's milder outside and was easier to get ourselves here, but our Gospel text has quite a different character also. In *Luke's* telling, *this* appearance of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth is the first recorded public act of his ministry. It's not a miracle, but rather a sermon; it's not so much *fun*, as it is challenging. And instead of ending in a kazillion gallons of wine for wedding guests to enjoy, it ends with the listening worshippers wanting to throw Jesus over a cliff! That happens in the verses immediately following our text today. Clearly, this is a totally different way to approach Jesus and the beginning of his ministry among us than we discovered in our lesson from last week. Why would that be?

Well, each of the four Gospels reflects the context of its author. Which means that we have four different perspectives on the same person and some of the same events. Naturally, each perspective is colored by the circumstances of the one observing or recording it. Plus, there's often confusion about the origins of anything, including a career path. For example, would my humble public ministry be seen as beginning with the first sermon I preached in my preaching class in seminary? Or with the first hospital visit I made during my chaplaincy internship? Or with the first worship service I led in my first parish in Grand Rapids? Who's to say? Any one of those events could be considered the beginning. *John* perceives Jesus' ministry as beginning with this festive sign of God's abundance at a wedding in our text from last week; *Luke* perceives it really began when Jesus gave his first sermon and laid out his vision of what it means to be the Messiah. It's not that one of the Gospel writers is right or wrong; it's a matter of having more than one perspective, and those two

perspectives create a kind of conversation between those two writers and us----we are the better for having both of these potential start-ups recorded for us, because both are so significant in their own way.

Our Scripture lessons this morning are, in part, about the importance of Scripture lessons, so a brief review here of Holy Scripture is in order. Remember again so crucially, what “Bible” means. It comes from the latin word, *biblio*, which means “little library”. The Bible is a *little library*. It contains 66 books, if you want to use that term, although they were scrolls of parchment originally, and many of those 66 books are themselves collections of material. It was written and compiled over the course of thousands of years. It contains a wide assortment of literature types by a wide variety of people in different places and times from one another, and there are no originals of any of those scrolls I just mentioned. And like any collection of such material over such a period of time, and as we’ve already observed between the Gospels of John last week and Luke this week, the Bible *is* a conversation---not only between God and humanity, but between the books contained therein. You doubt me? Consider this: whole chapters of Leviticus and Numbers are directions on how to offer sacrifices to God; and yet in the book of the prophets, we hear God say, “I desire mercy, *not* sacrifice.” Jesus will continually say, “You have heard it was written, but I say to you”...and sometimes he takes the Old Testament notion and makes it simpler and sometimes he sets the bar even higher. The Scriptures of one period respond to those of an earlier period; this book is a living conversation, *not* a static, rigid, leaden set of rules or tenets. This is a collection of conversations between God and humanity that invites *us* into conversation as well. We are not asked to be *passive* listeners of Scripture, but invited to participate in a conversation that literally changes us and has turned the world on its head.

Look at our first Scripture lesson from the book of Nehemiah. This is set in the 6th Century B.C., so over 2500 years ago, in Jerusalem, after Jews who had been exiled in Babylonia have returned. During that exile, the priests, in an effort to preserve their faith, had been collecting the various sacred scrolls and parchments, as well as writing down oral stories handed down for centuries by word of mouth, and they now have created a Scripture collection that could be read to the people---a people hungry for God’s word as they tried to find their way forward back in their homeland, much of it now devastated. This public reading was

necessary because the literacy rate was around 3%---obviously, most information was transmitted orally, as in this case. And we read that *everyone*---both men and women, which was notable within this setting---were invited present and attentive for this reading. And they didn't just stand passively while the Torah was read, they bowed their heads, they lifted up their hands, they said "Amen," and they wept---whether in joy or sorrow---they wept. And notice this crucial point---an interpretation was given after the reading, and I quote "they gave the sense of the words, so that the people understood the reading." Anyone who thinks Scripture doesn't require interpretation is out of step with the Scriptures *themselves*, where the need for some study, thought, and interpretation is accepted as the norm. This historic event in our lesson of collecting and reading aloud the Scriptures kindles within the Hebrew people a love of Scripture.

That love and reverence continues 500 years later into the time of Jesus and our Gospel lesson from Luke. Faithful Jews continue to gather weekly in the synagogue to hear scripture read and then interpreted. That's what's happening in our text. Notice that the action takes place in the synagogue in the town of *Nazareth*. This is significant, because we read in the first verses of the text that Jesus has been teaching in the surrounding country in the area of Galilee, but *not* in Nazareth, his hometown. Some of that teaching may have been in the towns of Cana and Capernum, which were not far from Nazareth. We know from last week that Jesus spent time in Cana attending that wedding; very possibly he also did some teaching there. So, it would be like one of us being a native of Knife River, but traveling up and down the North Shore, making an impression in one way or another down in Duluth and up in Silver Bay, but not having debuted yet back in Knife River. Jesus has been out and about, performing miracles, teaching in synagogues in *other* towns, and *now* he's come back home. This text relates a kind of homecoming experience. The hometown boy has made good elsewhere; he's developing a reputation for some fairly impressive accomplishments, and now he's back in his home church, so to speak, except that it's a home *synagogue*. Naturally, the good folk of Nazareth are all agog to see this son of Mary and Joseph and find out what's made him seem to be so special to *other* people in *other* towns. It was customary for the men of the synagogue to take a turn at reading the Scripture lesson, and that is what Jesus does here; he is essentially the lector for the day, probably recruited by a first century male version of

Melanie. He stands up and reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, Isaiah, chapter 62, verses 1 and 2, by our reckoning-- but of course, his scroll was without our contemporary divisions. He simply read the words we heard, rolled up the scroll, and sat down. Which was the traditional posture for a teacher while speaking in those days. We are told, “the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him”. Jesus then declares that the words of Isaiah which he just read have been fulfilled in their hearing. He identifies *Himself* with Isaiah’s prophetic words and so defines his ministry.

And of what does that ministry consist? We read, “In bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free, and proclaiming the Lord’s favor”. That was Christ’s mission statement, if you will, as He defined it for Himself. We may forget that as a Messianic mission statement, this left *much* to be desired in the eyes of most of his Jewish peers. 1st C. Jews, laboring under Roman occupation and poverty, were looking for a Messiah who would have a mission statement with a bit more *bite* to it. They needed someone to lead them, preferably militarily, and free them from Rome. Were *they* to craft a mission statement for the Messiah it might have been something like—“The Messiah is come to unify our people, create a militia, promote an uprising, and free us from our occupiers.” That’s not the same thing at all as Jesus’ words, and Jesus’ self-understanding of Himself as Messiah *never* lined up properly with theirs. Suffice it to say, that while at the moment we end our text this morning, things are looking pretty rosy, 10 verses after this, the good folk of the Synagogue are dragging him to the edge of a cliff to throw him over. They *really* didn’t like how He understood His identity, his purpose, and his mission.

Now, what *was* that mission again which caused such offense? “To bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” The words, in and of themselves, don’t seem all that aggravating, do they? Yet Christ *did* cause offense with His words to his original listeners, and if we think very deeply about what He said, His words may concern us also. And here’s why--if we have any kind of global awareness at all, we realize that we may not fit into the above categories so well, those for whom the coming of the Messiah was good news: the captive, the oppressed, the poor. Not that we don’t have struggles and problems, of *course* we

do---but in the big picture, we're not exactly the captive, the oppressed, *or* the poor. Certainly we can be held captive to prejudice or addictions; we can be oppressed by prejudices and fears; we can be poor in health or imagination or courage; it's legitimate to expand the meaning of those words. Still, we are mostly more privileged than not, and so Jesus' words make us uncomfortable and push us towards doing some self-assessment. That's what they're *supposed* to do, if we are in fact, in conversation with Holy Scripture. Words like these may lead us to do many of the things that we, congregationally speaking, *are doing*: volunteering at the food shelf, supporting the Center for Changing Lives for homeless teens, giving money to the Bethany Crisis shelter for children in crisis in the Arrowhead region, purchasing animals for God's Barnyard to assist in feeding families in developing nations. If our conversation with Scripture leads us to discover the joy of generosity and the meaning of being blest to *be* a blessing---then we've had a fruitful conversation, haven't we? That's what Scripture reading is intended to do; create a conversation between God, us, and others, that leads us to more joyful, generous, and faithful living.

In our first lesson from Nehemiah, the people hearing the Word of God read aloud were so grieved to realize how far they'd strayed, that they wept. But Ezra told them, "Go your way and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." Because of the amazing and inspiring power of Holy Scripture, those words, originally spoken about 2,500 years ago, still can become a part of our conversation with God through Scripture. We can still reflect on those words, claim them, internalize them, find hope in them: "the joy of the Lord is your strength." Who doesn't need to hear those words as resonating within them in a dark, cold January world with tumultuous national politics and natural disasters and scary illnesses? Over against whatever else is happening, God speaks to us and converses with us through Holy Scripture, which is surely remarkable. We have been challenged by some of the words of Christ this morning, and that's a good thing. We are also encouraged and nurtured by other parts of our texts this morning, including this beautiful promise that is ours to claim and internalize: "The joy of the Lord is your strength." Amen.