

Sermon for 3 Epiphany C
St. John's, Gloucester
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Lise Hildebrandt

In Nehemiah, all the people gathered in the square before the Water Gate in Jerusalem, and they heard Ezra the priest read from the Torah, the book of the Law, from early morning until noon. Other priests helped the people to understand what they were hearing. And the people were so moved that they wept.

In the Gospel, Jesus went to his hometown synagogue and was given the scroll of Isaiah. He found the passage from Isaiah chapter 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and has anointed me 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." Jesus's sermon is short and to the point: "Today as you hear these words, they have come true." And the people were amazed.

In both stories, people gather to **hear** Scripture. Of course, most people would not have been able to read, so the only way they would experience the sacred texts would be by hearing them. But the spoken word carries power—more so than private reading. We carry on this tradition today—even though most of us can read—we listen in worship to words read out loud. And the reading is a **community event**—hearing Scripture is a shared experience that shapes the whole community.

But here is the other point. In the coming together as a community and in the hearing of sacred texts, people stand at the juncture of past, present, and future. In Nehemiah, the returned exiles have spent years of hard work to reclaim the land and rebuild Jerusalem. They have suffered famine, attacks from nearby tribes, and even oppression from their own people. Finally, the walls were finished, and they gather to hear Scripture. They heard words from centuries earlier about the deeds of God to their forebears, and both the promises of God and the expectations of what it means to be God's people. Learning their true history—and understanding that they have gone astray, have neglected to love and serve God as they ought, moves them to tears. They heard of the past; they reflected on the present and were moved to want to change their behavior, their relationship to God, in the future.

The Gospel also captures this transitional moment that connects past, present and future. Jesus, in his hometown, reads the powerful passage from Isaiah, the "servant song" that speaks of the one who will come to heal, give hope, and provide freedom—the one who will support and encourage those who are coming back to a ruined land to rebuild the cities and replant the fields. Jesus, in his brief message, claims that he is the one promised by Isaiah. The past prediction has now come true. And in his day there is just as much need for healing, freedom, rebuilding and replanting as in the time of Isaiah. Because Jesus is the One, nothing will be the same in the future. This is the launch party of Jesus into his ministry. And the congregation is transfixed. At least at first.

Scripture provides the grounding for our faith. It is a touchstone that requires us to constantly return, to hear it once again in our present context, to interpret anew the Word of God. You don't get to do it once and you're done. And yes, it's complicated, and yes, some of it is inconsistent and even contradictory, so having some historical and literary background is helpful. Even without that, it's important to read, listen, pray, ponder Scripture. Best done in community.

We are faced today with some many challenges; we need this spiritual substance from the Word. Not to just feel good about ourselves, but to have the courage to face our past, live in the chaotic present, and move towards the future.

I've recommended that the vestry and search committee read the book The Church Cracked Open by the Rev. Stephanie Spellers. I've been reading it myself, and some of it is a tough go. Chapter 4 starts with this quote by Frederick Douglass: "The church of this country is not only indifferent to the wrongs of the slave, it actually takes sides with the oppressors." The author writes, "Douglass's words weren't directed at a particular church, but they could have been. No church in the United States of America compares to the Episcopal Church for longevity and depth of alliance with colonial, imperial power. For much of American's history . . . this particular branch of the Christian fold has energetically cooperated with, provided theological cover and blessing for, and received wealth and privilege from systems of colonization and White domination." Our beloved Episcopal Church is steeped in the blood of indigenous people and African slaves.

Spellers writes of the Jamestown settlement in 1609: "Men setting sail for Virginia first took an oath of allegiance to the king and the Church of England. . . One of the first structures built at Jamestown was a crude worship space. . . Anglican faith was at the center of the Jamestown enterprise." But Jamestown settlers would not have survived without the generosity of the Powhatan Confederacy, thirty tribal communities in the land around the settlers. When drought struck, the tribal communities didn't have enough for their people and the settlers, so Jamestown leader John Smith declared war on the defenseless indigenous people, unleashing a terrible violence with the goal of annihilation.

Spellers writes, "Look closely at this blood-filled scene,, at White settlers collecting the heads of Indigenous women and children and receiving tribute from the British commanders. Look to the leaders and governors like John Smith who made the call to enact irregular warfare, theft, and genocide. You will find behind them the Church of England." That's our heritage. That was our start in this land. And it didn't get much better after that.

How do these words sit with you? What are you feeling in your body? It's hard to stomach, isn't it? It makes me want to throw up. And it's not just in the past. It's who we are now, because we are part of the system of wealth and privilege that connects us all the way back. Like the people in Nehemiah, I want to weep and put on sackcloth and ashes.

And yet. Jesus says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, who has anointed me 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 declare the Lord’s jubilee year.” While it is clear that Jesus came especially for the marginalized—the poor, the sick, the imprisoned—we know that he also reached out to the rich and those in power. He also offered them a way to life. What has been well-documented is that White privilege imprisons and destroys White persons as well as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. We cannot be free and whole until we face our past and use our energies and wealth to set things right. Our lands are suffering and our cities and society need to be rebuilt. The message of Isaiah through Jesus is for us too. We have to do deep painful work and allow it to **change us**. But he promises to walk with us in this path, and to supply courage and bring forgiveness. He shows us just what it will take, because he walks the path, and suffers, and is transformed.

In the vestry and search committee retreat, we ended with a reflection on a passage from the Gospel of Mark. I was blown away by the depth of insight and the level of sharing, so I know you have it in you. I attended the Zoom coffee hour and once again heard people musing on Scripture and sharing openly their life struggles. And I know there is a faithful men’s Bible study. I encourage you to keep it up—keep dwelling in the Word, keep reflecting on your and our past, keep hearing God in the present, and use this to shape the future. We can do this.

Let us pray. Amen.