

Jesus and the Status Quo

Rev. Eugene N. Nelson, Jr.
The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Luke 4: 14-21

In Flannery O'Connor's short story, "Revelation," Ruby Turpin sat smug and self-satisfied in the doctor's waiting room as she evaluated one-by-one each person seated before her. Ruby judged herself to be superior, by more than a grade or two, to everyone there, especially superior to that poor, unkempt, teenaged wretch seated across from her reading some questionable psychology book. Ruby thought it sad that the girl's parents had not trained her to be polite, had not groomed her more attractively. Perish the thought of having a child as ugly and scowling as this one. The girl's name? Mary Grace.

As for Mary Grace, she had her eyes fixed on the book, until, without warning, she fixed her steely eyes, "like two drills" upon Ruby, making Ruby squirm under the directness of her stare. But Ruby chattered on about the relative superiority of poor blacks over "white trash" who, said Ruby, lived no better than the pigs on her farm.

With that, and without warning, Mary Grace hurled her book across the waiting room, hitting Ruby directly in the head. She fell to the floor with the girl on top of her, showing her teeth and hissing in her ear, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog!" It was the violent, shocked beginning, says Flannery O'Connor, of Ruby's grand redemption, the catalyst for her repentance..."

Imagine that...revelation beginning when a large book hits you upside the head. Ever have that happen to you...Maybe on a Sunday? Ever had "the book" thrown at you?

After years of bitter exile in Babylon, the Israelites had returned home, had returned to a destroyed Jerusalem. Under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra, it was a time for rebuilding, for new beginnings. The Temple would be rebuilt. But the huge question facing the returned exiles was...could they re-establish their life together as a community, and, even more important, could they reclaim their identity as a people of God, as a worshipping community? Much like Washington today, in Jerusalem, there were internal disagreements and divisions that threatened to undermine the community's future, factions arguing about who was in and who was out, who was right and who was wrong. Even as they began to rebuild Jerusalem, there was a real possibility that the entire community could unravel at the seams.

But then an amazing thing happened. As one of the walls of the city was being rebuilt, an ancient scroll was discovered in the wall, a copy of the Torah – the Law of Moses. And what we have in our Old Testament text for today is a gathering of the people of Jerusalem to hear Ezra, priest and scribe, read from that recently discovered sacred text, to hear these words which perhaps many had never heard before about how they were to live together as God's people.

"For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law." Scripture is read and the people weep. They weep perhaps because while in exile they had no access to these sacred texts. It had been so long since they had heard these wonderful words, again some had never heard them. Or perhaps they weep because when they hear the word read, they realize how far they have strayed from faithfulness to God and God's word. Or could it be that they weep for joy, weep because the words open them to the reality, the presence, of a God who can renew their life. They now understand that God has not forsaken them, has not abandon them to their own devices. God has spoken to them, spoken the promise that God will preserve them and care for them through thick and thin, joy and sorrow. By the time the reading ends, this once confused, anxious and divided people have been transformed. One might say they have been collectively hit upside the head by the book. Ezra and Nehemiah throw the book at them and they are forever changed.

Reflecting on this text, Carter Lester, a Presbyterian pastor, writes, "When we gather together as God's people, when we are conscious of coming into the presence of the living and holy God, when we center our worship on God's Word and offer ourselves to God, we cannot help but be changed." The transforming power of the Word.

"When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read..." Jesus reads the Word, and when he does we see, here in the beginning of the Gospel, who Jesus is, of what his ministry will consist, and what his church will be called to be and do. It is all revealed in the Word. Says Linda McKinnish Bridges, professor of religion at Wake Forest University: "Jesus announces that he has come to proclaim the good news to the poor. No longer do they need to wait. His message will bring much needed healing among the people. In addition, Jesus has come to bring forgiveness, to release those who have been imprisoned. To those

whose eyes have been blinded to the reality of God in their midst, he will provide sight. Jesus announces that his ministry will be like the year of Jubilee – “the year of the Lord’s favor.” Every fifty years the fields rested and were reinvigorated for future harvests. In this jubilee year, debts were forgiven, people returned home, slaves were set free.” The established way of doing things, the status quo, is about to be turned upside down, about to be nailed in the head by the Word. And when will this happen? How about today, how about now? “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

T.S. Eliot said that poetry attempts to turn ink into blood. If that is true, then one could say that the words read by Ezra and the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth turn words into flesh. When Jesus speaks, a new world comes into being, he is a world maker, and people are changed. A story told by Barbara Brown Taylor: “I remember a response to a sermon of my own. Who knows what it was about? All I remember is the man who came out of church afterwards – a sensible, well-heeled fellow, looking slightly stunned – who told me that God had spoken to him during the sermon that morning. He was going to quit his job on Monday. He was going to sell his car. He was going to change his life. I responded by saying, “Good grief! It was only a sermon! Sleep on it! Go get a cup of coffee! See how you feel in the morning!” Sometimes not even the preacher can quite believe the transforming power, the life-changing power, of the Word.

But some of you may know exactly what that man felt like. You come here on a cool and frosty January morning. Perhaps you aren’t even sure why you came. You might come after a tough week, or looking forward to a tough week. You might come here empty, down, grief-stricken, depressed. And then in the service something happens through your hearing of the word – the words of a hymn, a prayer, the scripture reading, heavens, maybe even the sermon. You aren’t sure how, aren’t sure when, but it is as if God has called your name, has spoken to you in the darkness, has brought order out of your chaos. You are aware of a new reality in your life, not formed by you, but by the word of God. You have taken a direct hit from the Word.

Old Testament scholar and noted preacher, Walter Brueggemann, says that the goal of preaching ought to be to invite listeners to “abandon the script” that has heretofore guided their lives, perhaps even provided purpose and meaning, and to introduce a new script that invites people into a whole new way of living. The task of the preacher is to show how and in what ways life can be re-imagined, re-described and relived if this new narrative - this word - is embraced. Pretty challenging stuff.

Perhaps that is why I was once told that the major task of a preacher is the creation of congregations that are bold enough to hear the Word without killing the preacher. Because every time the scroll is unrolled or the book is opened, the adventure begins. You just don’t know what might happen when God’s word is given the freedom to roam about in your life. It can be challenging, difficult, to abandon that familiar script. Consider...few people approach surgery willingly, even when they know it is the course of action they most need.

To walk with Jesus, to speak and hear his word, is to speak and hear countercultural word, especially in an individualistic place such as Sonoma County, or America, for that matter. It is to defy status quo and conventional wisdom about the way the world is. It is assert that we are not just a group of autonomous individuals guided solely by our needs and desires. What we acknowledge in worship, what we will acknowledge in our Annual meeting today, what we acknowledge as we seek to reach out to the hurting and the lonely, is that we are not our own, not free agents who can do as we please. We are a particular people called together and held accountable by the unbound, unlimited, untied Word of God –a word that has brought us together, indeed has created us, in this time and this place, to keep speaking a transforming word of life to a world seemingly in love with death. This is the word the people heard from Ezra and Nehemiah, this is the Word preached by Jesus that day in Nazareth – the unchained Word of God, breaking all bonds, escaping all prisons, sprouting wings, flying off the page, and creating and recreating the world, the church, even you and me, as often as any of them need creating.

In the words Taylor, “What we have lost...is a full sense of the power of God to recruit people who have made terrible choices, to invade the most hopeless lives and fill them with light, to sneak up on people who are thinking about lunch, not God, and smack them up side the head with glory.”

Prayer of the Iona Community:

Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?

Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?

Will you kiss the leper clean, and do such as this unseen?

And admit to what I mean in you and you in me? Amen