

Sermon: Epiphany 3

The Rev. Mike Wernick

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Year C

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

Psalms 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

Home... welcome home... it feels so good to be home... there's no place like home... my church home... home is the nicest word there is... home is the place where they take you in... love begins at home...

Over the years... I've noticed... that when I travel home after a business trip... or vacation... anywhere really... whether I fly those miles... or drive them... it always seems to take less time... to get home... than it took to get where I went... because if home is where the heart is... then home is where we must go to rest... regroup... and be both... fed and nourished...

The Two Churches I serve had their joint annual meeting last Sunday... and an annual meeting is a kind of homecoming too... we may see some church family who've been absent for a while... share a meal... as we did last week... catch up on stories... make new connections... but it can also raise up some apprehension or uncertainty... because we are polite people... and there may be some topics that we hope won't be raised... won't be talked about... there may be some decisions that need to be made... that we'd rather not make...

Or... we may hope that someone will finally be brave enough to raise them and talk about them... or bring them to a vote...

Some of us... if we see the elephant in the room... will want to ignore it... and some of us will want to not only name it... but identify its genus and species... and maybe even draw its family tree...

Today's reading from Nehemiah... took place after the Babylonian Exile... and it was during the exile that much of the Law was written... and the Israelites have come home... have come back to Jerusalem... and it's the first day of the seventh month... it is Rosh Hashanah... the Jewish new year... a time of new beginnings... the Temple has just been rebuilt... and is now being inaugurated... and as part of that process... as part of that corporate remembering... as part of that shared community experience... the Law... is being proclaimed... is being re-established... and then as now... the people stood to listen to the Word... men and women... and those who could understand...

And the people wept... because of the words of justice they heard and the beauty of God's love for them... and they may have been filled with regret... because they may have understood more fully now... how they had missed God's mark for them... but Nehemiah said to them... *No... go your way... eat the fat... and drink sweet wine... and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared... for this day is holy to our Lord... and do not be grieved... for the joy of the Lord is your strength...*

And we do need to feast from time to time... have you seen the movie *Babette's Feast*... we need to feast... so that we're not only imagining God's abundance... and the freedom in God's Law... but experiencing some of it too...

As Ps. 19 reminds us... *Your law... O God... is perfect and revives the soul... your testimony is sure and gives wisdom to the innocent... your statutes are just and rejoice the heart... your commandment is clear... and gives light to the eyes...*

And in today's Gospel... there is another light... another epiphany... the light of Jesus is being revealed even further... where we see scarcity and darkness... God in Christ... brings transfigured light and overwhelming abundance... like the abundance last week... of 180 gallons of the best wine... at the wedding in Cana...

Because after being tempted in the wilderness for forty days... Jesus returned to Galilee... and he taught in the synagogues... glowing reports about him spread throughout the countryside... and he was praised by everyone... but in his hometown... in his small hometown of only about 400 people... where everyone knew him... where some of his relatives were probably in the synagogue with him that day... he may have gone ahead and named the elephant in the room... like some people do at family reunions... Jesus lifted up God's justice... and in the private... concealed... unspoken places in their hearts... those in the synagogue may also have been filled with regret... because they may have understood more fully... how they had missed God's mark for them...

Although there's an interesting difference here... when Isaiah wrote the words that Jesus read... Isaiah included images of anointing... bringing good news to the poor and oppressed... proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor... and proclaiming liberty to the captives... the same images to which Jesus refers... but Isaiah also wrote... *to proclaim the day of vengeance of our God*... Jesus left that out that image... Jesus left out that piece... Jesus knew... that vengeance just begets more vengeance... and Jesus' ministry was marked by forgiveness... and reconciliation... and love...

And so it makes me wonder... if we project our own judgement... our own vengeance... onto our God who is a God of love... and it makes me wonder... when we think about proclaiming liberty to the captives... it makes me wonder... about the kinds of things to which we may be captive: substances... behaviors... destructive attitudes... people... technology... it makes me wonder... about the vow we make in our baptism... to renounce all sinful desires that draw us from God's love...

Fr. Mike Kinman writes... Jesus began his ministry in his hometown... among the people he knew... but there is a double-edged sword here... on one hand... people who know... and trust... and love you... are more likely to listen to you... and you have more power to affect them... on the other hand... there is an incredible amount of risk

involved... because you can damage relationships that are dear to you... often it is far easier for us to speak of intimate and difficult things to strangers... than to friends and family... sometimes it's easier for us to tell complete strangers about our faith [and God's forgiveness]... or to invite them to church... than it is to tell or invite our own families...

And Linda McKinnish Bridges... the adjunct professor of religion at Wake Forest University wrote... some scholars speculate that the very year Jesus appeared in the Nazareth synagogue... may have been the year of Jubilee... around 26 or 27 of the Common Era... the Jewish practice... that every fifty years... the fields rested and were restored for future harvests... debts were forgiven... slaves were freed... and people returned home... joyously returned home...

You see... Jesus was shaped by the words... perhaps the songs... he heard his mother singing... perhaps The Magnificat... when she sang about how God would scatter the proud in their conceit... cast down the mighty... and send the rich away empty... but that God would also lift up the lowly... fill the hungry with good things... and remember God's own promise of mercy...

In Nazareth... Mary's song... becomes Jesus' inaugural speech... and in this opening speech... in his first public proclamation of God's new law... implicit in his claim that this scripture was fulfilled in their hearing... was the revelation that Jesus came to bring God's justice... *without the vengeance*...

And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him... perhaps they looked intently at him... perhaps they stared him down... they say... *if looks could kill*... because sometimes... people can be so attached to their judgment... and their vengeance... that they don't want to let go of them... and sometimes... like a fish in water... which cannot see the water in which it swims... neither can some people see their own judgement... or desire for vengeance... for what it is...

We all want to be welcomed... into our families' homes... and into the homes of relatives and friends... we all want to be welcomed at Table... and God's radical grace... and unmerited forgiveness do welcome us there... for who and what we are...

But if we're fortunate... we also know that we are continuing to be formed... to be shaped... to be molded by God's loving hands... being made ready for one of the rooms in God's mansion...

But while we're here... there are still more elephants to name... more truths to tell... more justice to roll down like water... and more work to be done...

As the Talmud says... *do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief... do justly now... love mercy now... walk humbly now... you are not obligated to complete the work... but neither are you free to abandon it...* Holy God... make it so...

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