



## CALLED TO URGENCY

January 27, 2019, Third Sunday after Epiphany

Nehemiah 8:1, 3, 5-6, 8-10; Luke 4:14-21

Kimberly L. Clayton, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

---

Today's Scripture passages are so detailed they seem plodding, meticulously blocking out the scenes like stage directions for a play. It takes as much time to read Luke 4 as it would to act it out here in the chancel area: "He came to Nazareth...went to the synagogue...stood up to read...the scroll was given to him...He unrolled the scroll and found the place...he read...and he rolled up the scroll. Gave it back to the attendant, and sat down..."

The scene in Nehemiah took even longer—six hours to be exact! The lectionary drops a few verses here and there to speed things up—mostly names that even the most expert lector might find hard to pronounce. Still, Nehemiah does what Luke does...going into minute detail: "When the seventh month came...the people gathered in the square...by the Water Gate...told Ezra to bring the book of the law...Ezra brought the law...this was the *first day of the seventh month*...Ezra stood on a wooden platform made for the occasion...Ezra opened the book...he was standing above all the people...the people stood..." And it is at this point we know there is not a Presbyterian in the crowd because the text says next that when Ezra blessed the Lord, the people called out, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. (Can I get an Amen?!)

The details are intentional, I think, laser-pointing, directing our attention to the Book: The word of God being read, being given to and received by God's beloved people. For their part, they are eager, hungry with expectation. "The ears of all the people were attentive to the book," Nehemiah says. "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him," Luke tells us.



A few years ago, one of my students, an African-American whose church tradition engages in the lively ‘call and response’ style of worship, served as an intern in Africa. The first time he preached, he was disappointed in the response he got—or rather, didn’t get. No one offered a single ‘Amen;’ no one lifted a hand in praise or affirmation; the choir did not chime in underneath with a supportive melody. The congregation was completely silent. The. Whole. Time. Thinking he must have failed utterly, he asked his Supervising Pastor about it later. The pastor explained that in their context, people are silent during the scripture reading and the sermon. It is a respectful, expectant silence. “You see,” he said, “we are waiting eagerly for the Lord to speak to us.”

I wonder if, in our context, we listen like that anymore...waiting expectantly, eagerly in the silence of creation or together in the sanctuary, anticipating a word from the Lord to us. We live in a world of so many loud, insistent, instantaneous noises and distractions; bombarded with words, we may be in danger of losing our capacity for silence...for listening attentively, to wait eagerly for that Word beyond all our words. In an article a few years ago entitled, “Prayer in the Facebook Age,”<sup>i</sup> the author laments our loss of what he calls “replenishing, corrective moments” that come from occasional silence and solitude. He takes on the overwhelming presence of social media available to us, citing, “texting, selfies, updates, chats, snapchats, tweets, blogs, wikis, and email that allow us—even incite us—to gossip, boast, rant, strategize, self-promote, share, collaborate, inform, emote, and otherwise connect anywhere and all the time.”

Of course, there is a lot to appreciate about this connectivity. It is great to keep up with old friends and distant cousins on FB. And who doesn’t like to be tagged in a 30-year old photo of yourself in a bathing suit on a high school spring break trip?! Airport waiting is easier with plenty of charging stations. And speaking personally, if it weren’t for texting, I’m not sure how I would keep up with my young adult children!

Still the statistics are astounding. According to some reports, FB has 1.8 billion active monthly users and Twitter has 336 million monthly users. That pales in

\* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



comparison to Snapchat's 400 million *daily* users! Neilson Media reported a few years ago that a teen sends or receives 3,300 texts per month and logs 650 minutes of phone calls. But it was this quote that stopped me in my tracks...In a feature article about Mark Zuckerberg, *Time* magazine wrote this:

“Facebook wants to populate the wilderness, tame the howling mob and turn the lonely, anti-social world of random chance into a friendly world, a serendipitous world. You’ll be working and living inside a network of people and you’ll never be lonely again.” Zuckerberg said, ‘No matter where you go, we want to ensure that every experience you have will be social.’ ”<sup>ii</sup>

The article on prayer in the age of Facebook gets to the heart of the matter: That there is in us a deep spiritual hunger that social media can never fill. No matter how many ‘friends,’ ‘followers,’ or ‘likes’ we accumulate...the surest and most permanent source of comfort in our lives is God, who alone holds our deepest connection, in life and in death. The Spirit of God brings us into and binds us together with a covenant community of abiding and steadfast love.

What a contrast to the social communities we create for ourselves! Communities of fleeting timelines and instantaneous options to delete, unfriend, unfollow, or attack those with whom we disagree. We hear and see within selective, comfortable bubbles of like-minded people. But biblically speaking, it is precisely in the untamed wilderness we are most likely to encounter God. And it is in the sustained community of God’s diverse people that we learn to wait attentively and hope expectantly for a word from the Lord that can speak into our deepest need.

The people in Nehemiah had returned from long exile. Picking up the pieces, literally, of their lives and their land, they were rebuilding the city walls, repairing the temple and also the fragments of their faith. There was among them a deep hunger to reconnect with God, to remember who they truly were. It was the people themselves, not their religious leaders, who clamored that day for the Torah to be read. And when they gathered, it was not in the temple where only the men could hear...no, instead they congregated in a public space, by the Water Gate, where men and women and children and youth could all be present. They compelled Ezra



to get the book of the law; they built a special platform for him to stand upon. Then they stood for six hours, listening attentively to the story of how God created the world, chose their ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, made covenant, rescued them from slavery, kept them alive in the wilderness, and gave them the gift of the law to shape their life among the nations.

When they heard all of that...and remembered who they were called to be before God and with each other, they wept. But Ezra and Nehemiah told them to rejoice instead—to throw a party, have a feast, share bread with those who have none—because God’s strength is your joy, they said; because you have understood the word you have heard; because you know who you are...you are *God’s* people.

In Luke 4, Jesus is still filled with the power of the Spirit from his baptism and his wilderness testing. He returns to Galilee, teaching in the synagogues all around. Reports about him are spreading and the reviews are good. Now, he comes home. Back to Nazareth, where he was raised. And he did what he always did—he showed up for worship at his home church. Hometown boy made good; carpenter turned orator. They invited him to read scripture, maybe say a few words. They were so proud of him, and, okay...proud of themselves, too. Hadn’t they taught him in Sabbath School? Didn’t they all attend his bar mitzvah? Hearing all the great things he had been doing out in the countryside, they could only imagine what he would do for the hometown crowd.

All eyes were fixed on him when he read that great passage from Isaiah—about the promised Servant of God who would bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and set the oppressed free at last, free at last, thank God almighty, free at last...

On the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March on Washington, *The New York Times* invited people who had been at the original March in 1963 to send in accounts of their experience. The paper published some of them: Two seven-year-olds had gone with their fathers. Both remembered how hot it was: one perched on her daddy’s shoulders, wiping his brow with a handkerchief; the other remembered that her



father cried and told her never to forget this day. Others wrote of the electric, communal atmosphere: people sitting in groups strumming guitars and singing; strangers sharing food with strangers; others rolling up pant legs and dipping their feet into the waters of the Reflecting Pool. Several wrote that when Martin Luther King, Jr. began his speech, the huge crowd became utterly silent. No one spoke. Babies stopped crying, one person wrote; even the dogs stopped barking, recalled another. More than one declared that the experience changed the entire direction of their lives. The son of Holocaust survivors said he was radicalized forever, seeing the evils both his people and African-Americans had endured, but also seeing “the air itself palpably full of hope and excitement.”<sup>iii</sup> Reading these memories from 1963 in the midst of our own divisions and the tones of virulent speech today on every side brings—or should bring—a sense of urgency for the work still before us to remember and recover our call to be God’s beloved community in this time.

Jesus stood and read, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me 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.” Then he sat down, in the posture of a teacher. But it was not a history lesson about Isaiah that Jesus gave. Instead, he uttered an urgent one-liner: “*Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*”

Luke uses that word “*Today*” over and over again at crucial moments in his gospel. And every time it signals a revelation, a present experience of the power of God’s transforming salvation. So there is a sense of urgency in that *today*—the time is now, the time has come. The urgent *today* Jesus brings in Luke is never allowed to slip into memories of an idealized ‘past,’ nor does it become only some distant hope, devoid of substance. Jesus *enacts* that urgent *today* over and over again in his ministry on this earth.

*Today*, Jesus said: Good news to the poor *today*, release to captives, sight to the blind, *today* the oppressed go free. Debts are cancelled, sins are forgiven. *Today*, he said, and he meant, urgently, *today*.



Matthew and Mark put this scene later in Jesus' ministry, but Luke does something different and bold. This scene is placed at the beginning. It is, in fact, Jesus' first public declaration of who he is and the radicalizing thing he has come to do. We know up front who he is and what he is about. And we are put on urgent notice that if we want to follow him, *today* this is what we are also to do. His word *fulfilled* in our hearing.

It may seem a stretch to go from Martin Luther King to Stephen Colbert, late night comedian. But Colbert is also a devout Catholic and Sunday School teacher. And some years ago he said with his characteristically sharp wit:

“If this is going to be a Christian nation that doesn't help the poor, either we have to pretend that Jesus was just as selfish as we are, or we've got to acknowledge that he commanded us to love the poor and serve the needy without condition and then admit we just don't want to do it.”<sup>iv</sup>

*Today*, Jesus said. *Today*.

*Amen.*

---

<sup>i</sup> Mark Bauerlein, “Prayer in the Facebook Age,” in *First Things*, December 2014, 17-10.

<sup>ii</sup> Lev Grossman in his *Time* magazine profile of Mark Zuckerberg, Man of the Year 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> “Witnesses to History, 50 Years Later” in *The New York Times*, August 23, 2013.

<sup>iv</sup> From *The Colbert Report*, December 16, 2010.