

Yr. C, Epiphany 3
January 23, 2022
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1523 Words

Lessons: Zephaniah 3:24-20
1st Song of Isaiah (12:2-6)
Philippians 4:4-7
Luke 3:7-18

What do you do when your country becomes so fractured that people no longer want to work together? What do you do when factions become the primary source of peoples' identity...when we see our own group as the 'true patriots,' and other groups as enemies?

You should ask *Nehemiah*. He was the governor when all this was happening. Nehemiah presided at a time of severe conflict and fragmentation in Judah. He was in charge when the future of the nation was in doubt.

The people were rebuilding everything after returning home from exile in Babylon. They had a *common* experience of adversity. They had a *common* desire to build back the Temple, the city, the society—better than before. And, yet, they were divided. Why couldn't they all just get along? It's a question we should also be asking ourselves.

Ezra, the priest, had a good idea. He brought the Law of Moses into the city square. He read it to all the grown-ups—women as well as men—all morning long. Actually, he didn't just read it; he interpreted it...*he preached it!* From sunrise to mid-day, the people stood up and listened; and they also bowed down and prayed. Imagine that!

The people did not complain that the sermon was too long. (Ah, the good 'ol days!) Instead, they were delighted to have a fresh understanding of how the ancient Scriptures *still applied* to their contemporary lives. They were receiving fresh insight about how to live peacefully, productively, and even *joyfully*...with God and with their neighbors.

It's the priest who said to the people, "Do not weep (about your past infidelity). Stop mourning (over what you cannot change about the past)." Ezra wanted his congregation to celebrate what they *could do* in the present. He wanted them to rejoice over having a *new chance* to do better. The people should have been glad to have a holy and new beginning.

"So, get moving," he says. "Eat the fat! Drink the sweet wine! And share it with everyone, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

One of our Sacred Ground groups wrapped up this week. This is the Episcopal Church's course about racial justice, healing, and reconciliation. There are some hard truths in the assigned readings and videos. There are tough lessons that none of us remembered *ever being taught* in school or even in college. We heard perspectives that most of us are not accustomed to hearing. We were challenged with viewpoints from which we don't typically see.

One of my conclusions from the course is similar to Ezra's conclusion in our Old Testament lesson. First of all, I believe it *is important* to acknowledge and to grieve the sins of our nation's past. We should not suppress our true history as if it were a dysfunctional family secret.

Yet, like Ezra, I also believe it is also essential for us not to get stuck...in mourning what cannot be changed about the past. Rather, it is absolutely critical for informed, aware, faithful Christians in our nation to embrace a holy and new beginning. We get the chance to do much better with racial healing and reconciliation than many of our forebears did in the past. And *that* is a reason to celebrate!

We all remember how Jesus was tempted—to indulge *his own personal appetite*, to exploit *his own personal privilege* as the Son of God, and to seek *his own personal power* as a ruler over the nations.

After rejecting all of these normal, human temptations in the wilderness, Jesus went back home to Galilee, filled to the brim with the power of God’s Holy Spirit. One Sabbath, he went to his hometown synagogue, and was handed the scroll of Isaiah to read out loud. Of all the things he might have been handed to read, this was just perfect!

What you *may not know* is that this particular passage from Isaiah was probably written about the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. So, Isaiah was probably also writing to a fractured nation. He was also prophesying during a time of bitter disagreement and conflict. Although his nation suffered a common experience of adversity, some of the people were doing much better while other people were being abused, neglected, and left behind. Sound familiar?

Well, Isaiah believed way back then that the Spirit of the LORD was upon him, inspiring him to bring good news to all the *poor people* of his nation...he was inspired to proclaim release for those who were *unfairly* imprisoned, Isaiah proclaimed recovery of sight for the blind who were always overlooked. He was inspired to help the oppressed experience freedom for a change, and he preached about God’s favor for all the people who never received human favors.

Five hundred years later, Jesus read these very same words out loud to his friends and neighbors. Here’s the thing: Jesus did not proclaim Isaiah’s words as just a scriptural truth from the *past*. Jesus embodied these words as God’s Messiah in the present and for the future. These powerful words became the personal mission statement—the *central purpose*—of Jesus’ life. Every aspect of his earthly ministry makes perfect sense in the light of these words.

So, what does all this mean to us? I don’t know the full answer, but I think I do see a first step.

I can’t seem to stop thinking about last week’s Gospel lesson—those six, large, empty jars standing as a metaphor for all the wasted potential of a religious community and leadership that had lost its way in Jesus’ time. I keep thinking of how Jesus asked real people—like you and me—to fill those jars to the brim...of how Jesus not only transformed plain water into really good wine; but also how he transformed the whole purpose of those vessels into something new and good and timely.

As you know, I believe that God chooses real and imperfect people—earthen vessels—to fulfill God’s purposes. Which means we don’t have to sit around here empty, like so much wasted potential. In the midst of *our divided nation*, we can become healers and reconcilers.

Like the people who listened to Ezra in the city square, *we* can celebrate a holy and new beginning...a chance to do better than before.

Like Isaiah, *we can be inspired* to work for justice, freedom, and peace on behalf of people who have been consistently denied those gifts and opportunities.

Like Jesus, we can view the Scriptures not simply as truths from the past, but also as a personal and direct mission statement for our faithful ministry *in the present*.

Last week I finally started doing something about the avalanche of books surrounding my writing desk in our bedroom. I, and one other person living in our house, have been wanting me to build larger bookcases.

I'm not a great woodworker, but I have been mentored well by some very good woodworkers in this parish. I have learned that the most important tool of all is one that does not use electricity or have a sharp blade. The most simple, powerful, truth-telling tool of all—is a square. If you want your book shelves to be level and straight, you must use a square. If you want *anything you build* to be level and straight, you'll use a square. It tells the truth—*every time*. It tells you where you need to adjust *one board* in order to be parallel (or perpendicular) with another one.

For Ezra and Nehemiah, their 'square' was the Law of Moses. Without even delving into the 613 commandments, the top ten will give you a clear idea of how to live productively, peacefully, and joyfully with God and with your neighbor.

When the prophet, Isaiah, held up the Law and saw how it was being mis-applied to the crooked benefit of some and to the crooked detriment of many others; he became inspired by God's Holy Spirit to speak out and work for justice on behalf of the poor, the unfairly imprisoned, the blind, the oppressed, and those were denied favors.

For faithful Christians, the Law of Moses is helpful, but it is not our 'square.' Our powerful, perfect, truth-telling 'square' is Jesus. We can judge our thoughts by his thoughts. We can judge our words by his words. We can judge our deeds by his deeds. And in today's Gospel lesson, all of his thoughts, words, and deeds are summed up in this crisp, clear, personal mission statement.

So, if we want our lives to be parallel with his life, we know exactly how we must adjust our *crookedness*. We know precisely how much it will take for us to become straight.

Take heart, dear people, there's no need to mourn what cannot be changed in the past. Scripture is not just about truth in the ancient past; it's a direct and personal challenge in the present.

Every day, we have a chance to 'level up' with a holy and new beginning. In other words, as Jesus himself said, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Amen.