

Today's Good News
Sunday, January 24, In the Year of Our LORD, 2010
First Congregational United Church of Christ
Gloversville, New York
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

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

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he 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, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘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.’

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

There are a number of accounts in the Gospels of Jesus reading and teaching in His home synagogue in Nazareth. While in a number of instances Jesus is welcomed – perhaps even, as in this instance, initially with praise – most accounts do not end well – as the people of His community took umbrage at His claims – either that ancient and sacred Scripture was, right then and there, fulfilled or in seeming to rise above His assumed position in life – namely that of a carpenter’s son.

Some people of Nazareth were put out – or off – by the manner by which Jesus spoke and read – for as far as many of them were concerned, this was a man with little education, indeed whose parentage was in some question (after all, there was talk that Mary was pregnant with her first son before she spent any time with Joseph). So, while there might have been some question about Jesus’ standing in the community to warrant His being allowed to read in the synagogue, must not there have been *some* questions about *what* He read and claimed to be true in their hearing? Or, did the “good news” shared that day get lost because of a controversy over the identity of the messenger? Let’s look at *what* Jesus said had come true.

There is good news for the poor.
There is release for the captives.
The blind are given their sight.
The oppressed may go free.
This is the year of the LORD’s favor.

Did anyone stop and wonder when and where Jesus learned to articulate Himself so well when they thought Him a carpenter's son? He was, after all, one of them - which meant poor and uneducated. Here he was, echoing the vim and vigor and with the same assurance as we heard from Ezra and Nehemiah in our earlier reading! So, I wonder if perhaps some people in the synagogue that day raised a proverbial eyebrow and ... well, perhaps a conversation like this might have unfolded, say between a woman named Miriam and a man named Elias (this is fiction – a fabrication of my own imagination)

Miriam: Did you hear what Jesus said about good news for the poor? Do we not have to pay taxes to Herod and Caesar this year? Did the price of bread go down? Did Jesus find a bag of gold He is going to share with everyone?

Elias: I have no idea what He meant by that. And what about those released captives? Did Herod let John out of jail? Is your cousin going to be freed by the Romans?

Miriam: As far as I know everyone is still locked up! And, as far as I know, my aunt is still blind! The blind are given their sight? I think that boy is delusional. His mother was an odd one, you know – claiming some Spirit made her pregnant with Him!

Elias: And as for the oppressed going free, until those Romans are all gone, no one is free and we are still oppressed. This is no year of the LORD's favor!

Miriam: I wonder what Mary thought about what her Son said today! She is always looking so – well, dreamy, as though she isn't really all there – as though her mind and soul are somewhere else. Never mind, I'm still poor, the captives are still in jail, the blind are still blind and until that deranged Herod is dead and the Romans are gone, we are still oppressed! Good news? I don't know any good news. Frankly, I don't see any reason to hope for any good news. That Jesus is just plain crazy! And, just who the "whatever" does He think He is – talking to us like that?

.....

Now, let's take a step back and "listen" to a second conversation – but from and with a different perspective. After all, some favorable reports *had* circulated about Jesus. Let's pretend for a moment that Miriam and Elias were predisposed to be a bit more reflective than the first dialogue suggests:

Miriam: I have to stop and think about what we just heard – because that Jesus is a deep thinker – I always thought He was different, that He would do more than just be another carpenter.

Elias: I think I know what you mean. Did you hear what Jesus said about good news for the poor? I wonder what He really meant by that? I don't think He meant we were all going to suddenly be rich. Maybe He means that we are going to stop worrying so much about what we have or don't have, that we are rich in so many ways – rich in faith, rich with family, rich with hope – yes, hope –

Miriam: And to cling to hope is to no longer be captive to fear and worry – maybe that is what He meant by release for the captives and freedom for the oppressed. I heard about some people actually getting their sight, but maybe we need to open the eyes of our souls to the goodness of life around us, and maybe open our eyes and no longer be blind to how others are even less fortunate than we – and how we can help them.

Elias: We blame the Romans for oppressing us – but maybe we oppress each other with our bias and our prejudice and our haste to condemn. Just think of how mean we are to Mary because she was pregnant that first time God knows how!

Miriam: And maybe, just maybe, if we practice hope instead of despair, love instead of hate, peace instead of discord, faith instead of mistrust, we can enjoy a year of our LORD's favor!

.....

There were times this last week, when it was hard to read this passage from Luke and not shake my head and be as pessimistic or as literal as Miriam and Elias were in my first contrived dialogue. This is not the time or place to recount *all* that might have wrought despair instead of hope, but certainly the dim news from Haiti (we will get to the hope part in a bit) and the current snarling nature of American politics did little to make this feel like a year of the LORD's favor. And on occasion, the "straw that breaks the camel's back" is just that, something which on its own is not a big deal, but taken in conjunction with all else just seems to – well, be the proverbial little, insignificant almost weightless piece of straw that is just too much.

For me, it was the news out of Afghanistan that the sights for the Sharpshooter assault rifle used by American, British and New Zealand troops, produced by a US company Trijicon and founded by a devout Christian, and bought this week to boost the fight against the Taliban, are etched with characters with scriptural references. JN8:12 is a reference to John 8:12, "When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life". Another refers to 2 Corinthians 4:6, "For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

Now apparently this company etched scriptural references on the sights of assault weapons for decades, and some people claim that those of us who protest that are making a mountain out of a molehill. The British and New Zealanders contended this might be construed as further evidence of a Christian crusade against Muslims. Fortunately, our own General Petraeus agrees that the company should stop producing the weapons with the etching. Maybe it is just my problem, reinforced because as an Air Force Chaplain, I was forbidden from ever picking up a military weapon, but while I can not imagine aiming a weapon at another human being, I am really bothered by the world's "best and most precise" sight mechanism etched with words about Jesus as the light of the world.

For many reasons, it did not seem like a week, much less a year a LORD's favor.

But there is another perspective is there not? Certainly the outpouring of relief for the people of Haiti, the demonstration of cooperation by peoples from around the world who have sent relief to that Caribbean island nation, shows that as a human race we can, even though it takes a tragedy to bring out the best in us, ... we can, set aside differences and find another path that rejects apathy, despair and hand-wringing.

That other perspective invites us as sisters and brothers in faith, no, it *insists* – be it the context of recovery for the people of Haiti or reason and sanity in American politics or amongst peoples of the world who work and pray for peace and harmony in places where it seems so impossible to achieve – it insists we embrace hope instead of despair, love instead of hate, peace instead of

discord, faith instead of mistrust, ... so that all of God's people might enjoy a year of our LORD's favor!

In 2007, AARP held a video contest called U@50. Contestants were asked to create a two-minute video describing their vision of the future; what life would be like by the time they turned 50. A Jonathan Reed won second place with the following submission. In the video, we hear these lines and then, in reverse. Listen to the two perspectives!

Lost Generation by Jonathan Reed

I am part of a lost generation
and I refuse to believe that
I can change the world

I realize this may be a shock but
"Happiness comes from within."
is a lie, and
"Money will make me happy."

So in 30 years I will tell my children
they are not the most important thing in my life

My employer will know that
I have my priorities straight because
work
is more important than
family

I tell you this
Once upon a time
Families stayed together
but this will not be true in my era
This is a quick fix society

Experts tell me
30 years from now, I will be celebrating the 10th anniversary of my divorce

I do not concede that
I will live in a country of my own making

In the future
Environmental destruction will be the norm

No longer can it be said that
My peers and I care about this earth

It will be evident that
My generation is apathetic and lethargic

It is foolish to presume that
There is hope.

....

There is hope.
It is foolish to presume that my generation is apathetic and lethargic.
It will be evident that my peers and I care about this earth.
No longer can it be said that environmental destruction will be the norm.
In the future I will live in a country of my own making
I do not concede that 30 years from now, I will be celebrating the 10th anniversary of my divorce.
Experts tell me this is a quick fix society. But this is not true in my era
Families stayed together once upon a time.
I tell you this family is more important than work.
I have my priorities straight because my employer will know that they are not the most important thing in my life
So in 30 years I will tell my children “Money will make me happy.” is a lie, and “Happiness comes from within.”
I realize this may be a shock but I can change the world and I refuse to believe that I am part of a lost generation.

Hear the good news! We as people of faith can change the world! We can bring good news to all people, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed and a better way by which to live as brothers and sisters on this globe of God’s creation.

‘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.’

Amen.