

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

“Upon My Word” is the title of today’s sermon. My mother used to use that phrase as a threat. “Upon my word, Kathy” she would say, often shaking her finger; and I knew that I’d better do whatever it was she was telling me to do or else there would be some consequence, and I probably wouldn’t like it. And I was a good girl...

Today’s passages – from Psalm 19 in the Call to Worship and the Law to the Gospel reading from Luke to the Old Testament story you just heard – are all about the Word of God – the ancient Word, discovered anew, unrolled, declared and come alive. And **the Word of God has the power to challenge and to change lives.**

The ancient people we see in Nehemiah have lived away from Israel for a very long time. Life in exile in Babylonia was probably not awful, maybe even just fine for some. They were treated well actually. But it was easy for them to stray from their faith traditions and become acclimated to life in that other place, where other gods were worshiped.

Time passes. A remnant – those more faithful – is allowed to return to Jerusalem. Under the leadership of Nehemiah, the governor, and Ezra, the priest, they attempt to rebuild the temple and to reinvigorate the faith community. By this point in the Hebrew scripture we read from today, they have been working at it for sixteen years. Their cultural and religious identity is still in a shambles, torn apart by internal arguments and enemies from outside. (Hmmm – sounds like health care reform)

So the public reading of the Law was a major event to help them remember who they were as the people of God. There's a lot to observe here about the power of the Word to challenge and to change lives.

The very first line of the passage is this: *all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate*. All the people – men, women, children who were old enough to understand. The unity of the people is emphasized by the number of times that “all” the people is mentioned in this passage. **The Word of God is inclusive; the Word calls all people to come before God together.** Group dynamics then works to swell enthusiasm and heighten the experience.

Second, the Word calls people into worship, into realizing that here is something beyond themselves to which they must bow down. I think of the Wise Men years later, led by the star to a stable in Bethlehem, bowing down and offering their own great wealth and prestige to pay homage to the infant Jesus. This passage from Nehemiah is loaded with worship images – *...the ears of the people were attentive to the book of the law... And Ezra opened the book [of the law] in the sight of all the people...and when he opened it, the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord...and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands...then they bowed their heads...with their faces to the ground.* **The Word of God reminds us of our place before God; it is a call to worship.**

Then, the Word is interpreted; the Word needs to be interpreted. Beginning at the end of Verse 7: *the Levites helped the people to understand the law...So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.* This may have been a matter of translation. The Torah was written in Hebrew, but now the people are speaking Aramaic. So the Levites

translate but not word for word – you almost can't do that with Hebrew. So they pause, rephrase, clarify, explain, interpret. So it also becomes a matter of relating the ancient Word, the ancient Law, to their present circumstance because the Word of God has the power to challenge and to change lives but only when people can make sense of it. **The Word of God calls us to understand God's expectation and hope and promise for us in our own time and place.**

Finally, we hear Nehemiah say to the people: *“This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.”* For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. Why were they crying? Perhaps they are overcome with a sense of their own sinfulness. In exile they had let go of the Law; it was so easy to do that. They had been unfaithful. So maybe these were tears of confession. Or perhaps tears of relief that their infidelity wasn't being held against them. They were assured of God's pardon. And then tears of joy that they had the strength of the Law again to guide them and assure them of God's continuing loving presence. However you read those tears, it is clear that the **Word of God calls us into account: to confess, accept forgiveness and to go on in life with joy in our hearts.**

Centuries pass. The temple in Jerusalem is finally rebuilt and the Word of God, the Law of God, governs the way the people live together. But the Law has become wooden, strict, overburdened with minutiae. The religious leaders have sucked the spirit of the living God out of the Law. It's like the Law of God and the Word of God have gone their separate ways.

Enter Jesus, the Word of God made flesh for us and for our salvation. Jesus himself did not come to change the Law but to make it alive again.

You heard him say this in the reading from Luke. *“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* Jesus had read from the prophet Isaiah: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...”* – the essence of the Word of God. Jesus retaught the Law – love the Lord your God above all else and your neighbor as yourself. And we know that Jesus went on to preach and to teach and to die on the cross for the sake of God’s holy Word to humanity.

Here now was the Word of God again – alive and challenging and with the power to change lives. Here was the Word again – calling us to come before God, calling us to worship, calling us understand God’s continuing presence and eternal love, and yes calling us to accountability.

Centuries pass. **Does the word of God still have the power to challenge and to change lives I wonder?**

If the Bible were a banned book in our society, would you sneak a way to find a copy and read it or would you say, oh well, there’s lots of other stuff to read and to watch and to listen to?

If meeting in churches was disallowed and the buildings were turned into antique stores or community centers or historic monuments, would you find a way to meet together in someone’s house or at the local Starbucks to read and study the Word and let it call you to action in the name of Jesus?

Ah, you say, that kind of thing can’t happen here, and legally speaking you’re right. But I’ll tell you, we are letting it happen nonetheless. Just like those ancient Jews in exile, we are letting the Word of God lose its power to challenge and transform our lives. We’re not paying much attention to it, really. There’s so much else to do.

How much are we really listening for God's voice or watching for Holy Spirit? How much are we letting the Word move us to action, deepen our prayers, influence our thinking, bring us peace?

Jesus came to re-enliven the Word – with himself; he was the Word. He will not come again – not until the end of time. But Jesus sends us out to keep the Word alive. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” (Matt. 28: 19-20).

I think we have to ask ourselves: Honestly, how are we doing? We are good people, God's children. God loves us, just as a mother loves her daughter or her son. But I also wonder if God isn't saying, “Upon my Word, people...”

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January 24, 2010