

3 Epiphany C “When the Word Turns our World on Its Head”

"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. ... for the joy of the LORD is your strength." Neh.8:9b,10b

In 1998 Harvard's Senior Class was about to be addressed. On the morning of their graduation, seniors gathered in Memorial Church to hear the chaplain offer words of solace and encouragement as they leave "the Yard" to take their places in the world.

But what the senior class heard was the unvarnished truth from the Rev. Peter Gomes, chaplain at Harvard and the author of several books on the Bible. Doctor Gomes took no prisoners that day. He began: "You are going to be sent out of here for good, and most of you aren't ready to go. The president is about to bid you into the fellowship of educated men and women and, (and here he paused and spoke each word slowly for emphasis) you know just - how - dumb - you - really - are."

The senior class cheered in agreement.

"And worse than that," Doctor Gomes continued, "the world - and your parents in particular - are going to expect that you will be among the brightest and best. But you know that you can no longer fool all the people even some of the time. By noontime today, you will be out of here. By tomorrow you will be history. By Saturday, you will be toast. That's a fact - no exceptions, no extensions."

"Nevertheless, there is reason to hope," Doctor Gomes promised. "The future is God's gift to you. God will not let you stumble or fall. God has not brought you this far to this place to ABANDON you or leave you here alone and afraid. The God of Israel never stumbles, never sleeps, never goes on sabbatical. Thus, my beloved and bewildered young friends, do not be afraid."

How sweet it is when a word spoken in due season gets to the heart and sheds light on our situation! It is an "Aha!" experience.

That was the experience of the returning exiles in Jerusalem when they heard Ezra, the priest, read Holy Scripture. They had not heard it for fifty years. They got accustomed to living without it and when they heard it the words cut their hearts open. They stood for hours listening to the law of Moses being read and taught to them.

How tragic when preachers take little time and thought to make the word of God inviting! How sad when the church fails to make the word of God life giving in what it teaches its members! How dry our souls become when the liturgy that once fed us becomes stale and moldy!

At his first service, the new preacher's sermon was extremely long and dull. As he preached, he drank from a pitcher of water until it was completely gone. After the service, someone asked an elder of the church, "How did you like the new pastor?"

"Fine," she said, "but he's the first windmill I ever saw that was run by water."

In today's story from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus goes to the opposite extreme and preaches what could be the shortest sermon in history. He attends a home-coming service at the synagogue in Nazareth where he was brought up. He is given the scroll of Isaiah and he reads from the 61st chapter:

"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 sits down. When a rabbi sat down, it didn't mean he was finished. That's the position from which they taught or preached. Imagine a rector sitting and getting comfortable before a sermon! It might be awhile before the congregation gets up! After Jesus sat down he says,

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing".

That's it. That was a very short sermon yet so far reaching. Jesus purposely chose a lesson to read that would bring hope to his hometown. They were pleasant words. They were words of Isaiah the prophet that would announce good news that God's people had a future with God in it. A short sermon with a one liner. They loved it until Jesus said something rude – they felt what he said was

disrespectful and downright judgmental. **The word of God will turn our world on its head.**

Jesus spoke pointing to himself as the fulfillment of the lesson. He would usher in a new way of doing things. And when he was done living out Isaiah 62:1 people would know the Lord's favor had come. It was bold. It was brash and radical. He got their attention. His words cut their hearts open and what was in there was "none too nice." Jesus didn't have time for long sermons with flowery speech. These religious people need to know who he is 'cause he doesn't have time to play at synagogue. **The word of God turned their world on its head.**

Pray with me this year that we would have a hunger to know God's word and his truth. And being hearers of the word pray we would stand up as they did in Ezra's day and be doers of the word. Jesus did not have the time to play church. Neither do we. And while he lives in eternity we do not. Our Lord does not have time to play church because he had a plan back then as he does now. We are the body of Christ and he has work for us to do. He has given gifts of many kinds for us to give away. There are people in need who want his touch. But first, **the word of God must turn our world on its head.**

Only then will he awaken our spirit, cut open our hearts and hear his voice to direct our steps. The people in synagogue wanted Jesus to be the good news for them just as we do today. The issue at stake was they were not willing to be the good news themselves! When people realize God will not do anything without us (we are his body) and we act, then we will see the favorable year of our Lord.

Some parishes are called sleeping giants. Other parishes are just asleep. I have been told that according to the latest philosophy on church development it takes years for a parish to go through its cycle of grief, recovery, new identity and growth. All that may be true. Meanwhile, maybe God wants some of you to grab hold of the beanstalk and give it a good shaking so the giant wakes up! Let's shake the giant and find the gold – why wait? The favorable year of the Lord is upon us. AMEN.