

January 24, 2010; 3EpiphanyC
Neh 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Ps 19
I Cor 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

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Late in 2005 or early in 2006, I took a group of parishioners from St. Luke's church on a mission trip to Camp Coast Care on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. While we were there, I hoped to be able to make contact with someone from St. Patrick's Church, which we had adopted as our companion parish in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. St. Patrick's was a blue-collar parish in Long Beach Mississippi; it had lost its church, its town, and many of its parishioners. I do not mean that many parishioners had died; rather, they were mis-placed: they had fled from the Hurricane, and, with the loss of their homes and jobs, had not returned. In many cases, the church did not even know where they were.

One thing the parish did have was David Knight, a priest who was about four months out of seminary. We met him on Sunday, when it turned out that the remaining members of the church were worshipping in the school gym where we volunteers slept. We helped him pull aside the breakfast tables, move in an altar, set up candlesticks; then we joined the parishioners in the bleachers. The scripture that day was from Numbers; it picked up the Exodus story right after the Hebrews had been freed, when they first came to the Promised Land. And they sent spies ahead to see what they were up against, and when the spies returned, they told the Hebrews: "The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. ...and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them." (Num 13:32-33) And Rev. Knight challenged his people to adopt a grasshopper spirituality: not one that relied on their own strength, but one which could look at conditions which were overwhelming, at situations which made them feel small, and to see these times of exile as times to grow in faithfulness, times to gain strength, times to wait upon the favor of the Lord. That day, the Spirit of the Lord was upon Father Knight; he brought hope to people who were sorely broken; he helped them to see that God was working in their lives.

When Jesus stood up in the synagogue at Nazareth and opened the scroll with the words of Isaiah and began to read, it sounds to you and to me like a triumphant proclamation:

'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.' (Luke 4:18-19)

Here, surely, is the fulfillment of the hope of Israel, the end of long years of adversity. Here, surely, is the culmination of history, the long-awaited restoration of the Kingdom. But in fact, it was a beginning, not an end. The Hebrews still lay in the grip of Rome, at the mercy of men like giants, next to whom they seemed as grasshoppers. Jesus' audience were the poor, the oppressed, the political captives, those whose eyes had never seen the freedom of Israel. If that Scripture was fulfilled that day, as Jesus said it was, then his idea of fulfillment must be different from ours.

We get a taste of it, perhaps, in today's lesson from Nehemiah. After seventy years of exile, some of the Hebrews have returned from Babylon and rebuilt the city walls around Jerusalem. And so Nehemiah the governor gathers them together in the seventh month and calls upon the scribe Ezra to read from the Book of the Law, the Torah. And for a whole day the people stand in the sun

and listen to the reading of the law. For a whole day, the people listen, and are reminded who they are. And they weep. We do not know why, but we can guess. Perhaps these are tears of joy: joy at being home in their own land, joy at being able to hear, probably for the first time in their lives, a public recitation of what they believe. (When you recite the creed in a few minutes, imagine that was the first time you were *allowed* to say the words; what would that be like?) Perhaps they are tears of compunction, as they hear in the law all the sins they did not know they were committing and all the penalties that it seems they have incurred. Perhaps they fear that God is angry. Perhaps it is the long-held grief of exile, making itself felt now that it is safe for them to feel. Whatever it is, the Hebrews that day stood, not at an end, but at a beginning. It was the year of the Lord's favor for sure, the year in which they could begin to turn again to God.

This worship, for that's what it was -- the first worship in a modern paradigm, without sacrifice -- was an act of reconsecration for the community. After the pain of exile, after the building of the wall, after years of feeling small, of being told they were nothing, they listen to the word of God telling them they are something: a blessing for all people. Still ahead lies the work of building the crumbled homes, the public spaces, the structure of government: all the infrastructure of their society. Before any of that, they need to remember who they are, so that the city they build will reflect their place in God's heart.

And that place is a surprise to them. For when the people begin to weep, their leaders stop them: "This day is holy to the Lord your God: do not mourn or weep." (Neh 8:9) In spite of their sins, in spite of their years of trouble, this day is a day of joy, a day for feasting, "for the joy of the Lord is your strength." (Neh 8:10) Anthea Portier-Young points out that "the joy of the Lord" is an ambiguous phrase. It can mean either our joy in God, or God's joy in us. It is a kind of fulfillment: the perfect reciprocity of the gathered community, God speaking to the people, the people living toward God, the acts of their future spinning out like the arms of a newborn galaxy.

Always we turn again. We come to church; we gather as a community; we listen to the reading of the Word. Someone explains it to us, trying to leap the gap of centuries so that we can respond in our own context. We take in these words, take them to heart, and then we go forth, not to mourn, but to feast, to drink, to enter into the joy of the Lord. Even when we have done wrong (or believe we have), we are told of mercy, of grace, of forgiveness: of the saving acts of Jesus Christ in which God subsumes all our sin into God's unbreakable life. It is a pattern engraved in our selves, week after week. It prepares us for the hard times, for the times when we have to rebuild our selves and our lives.

In Haiti last Sunday, the streets were choked with people trying to find a place to pray. More than 100 of the 140 parish churches in the Episcopal Diocese of Haiti have been destroyed, and yet people stood in the ruins or near them, and tried to pray. And priests sought words in which to proclaim good news to the poor. The Spirit of Lord was upon them, surely, in whatever halt and broken words they found to speak, for they were trying to offer hope. It did not look much like the year of the Lord's favor, I guess: broken buildings, hungry people, the teams searching for the dead. But I suspect that even so, when the people drew near to hear the Word of the Lord, they were claiming the joy of the Lord. They were seeking the strength to go on, the courage to build again.

The Hindus claim that the true nature of reality is bliss, *ananda*, pure and absolute. It's a powerful idea: that underneath everything and within ourselves the heartbeat of the world is joy, sustaining, maintaining, making us whole, even when it seems we have lost everything. I think it works for us as well: that the Spirit of the Lord is the spirit of joy. Not of happiness! -- *that* comes and goes. But of the soul-deep, life sustaining joy which draws together the community of God, nurtures us, sustains us, and sends us forth, out of these walls, out of our despair, out of the grave, bursting from the tomb like the driving force of new life breaking the seed until it sees the dawn.

