

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, Co-Pastor

January 24, 2010
3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 4:14-21

In Your Hearing

This morning we have dedicated the gifts of some new handbells that have been added to those that we have had in our church for over 10 years now. In these 10 years we have become accustomed to hearing the bells in worship from time to time. Each time the bells are played we are treated to yet another way in which the worship of God is expressed by the people of God in this church. The inclusion of bells in our services connects us with a long tradition of ever expanding our methods of praise and adoration of God. The last of the 150 psalms in the Old Testament provide us with a rundown of some of these multiple expressions: trumpet sound, lute, harp, tambourine and dance; strings and pipe, clanging cymbals and loud clashing cymbals. The final words of the 150th Psalm are, "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!" (vs. 6)

We have been blessed in this congregation for the long tradition here of praising God with a wide range of beautiful music. Week after week we are led in worship by musicians who offer praise on our behalf through the saxophone, piano, and organ. We regularly hear strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion instruments all of which add to our adoration of God. And harkening to our roots in the highlands of Scotland we occasionally have the sound of the bagpipes filling our sanctuary, and stirring the cockles of the hearts of those whose heritage lies in the Hebrides.

And when we add the human voice to the mix, our praise and adoration take on an even deeper and more profound meaning, for the expression of the words that combine with music creates a nuanced depth to our expressions of gratitude to our creator God. So our song leaders, choirs and soloists join forces with our instrumentalists who in turn inspire the singing of the whole gathered congregation so that at times we can almost blow the top out of this sanctuary! There have been countless such incidents over the years.

There's another reason for including the arts in worship. Surely the visual and musical arts inspire our praise of God. But the arts can also add to our growing in faith and spirit as we learn about our God and about Jesus and the Holy Spirit who have so much to teach us. Long before the literacy of God's people could be assumed, the Christian church through the ages sought to teach the great stories of the Bible through the visual arts and particularly through the stained glass windows that were included in the church buildings. Although church buildings like ours, built 100 years ago, in 1910, were constructed when most if not all could read and likely had their own copies of the Bible, the tradition of including significant Christian imagery and symbolism was continued. Take a closer look sometime at our windows and see how much teaching you can find. But older Christian churches in Europe have countless examples of telling the stories visually. Last year when we were in Ireland and Northern Ireland, we saw numerous such examples in the churches we toured. One memorable church, St. Patrick's Cathedral in Armagh, not only included glorious windows, but the walls of the sanctuary and ceiling were covered with tile mosaics that also told the stories. That church was a visual cornucopia of Christian education.

I mention the arts today, in part because of this handbell dedication we've just done, but also as a reminder that God's truth becomes real for us in multiple ways. When Jesus went to the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, some of the people who were with him that day discovered this as well. Luke's gospel sets this story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, even before he had called his first disciples. Jesus had been baptized. He had gone into the wilderness for 40 days to fast and pray where he also encountered and resisted the tempter. And now as he emerged from that wilderness he returned to his home town and to the synagogue where he had grown up and where he had been nurtured in his Jewish faith. It was customary for Jewish men to step forward during the worship in the synagogue to stand and read from the Hebrew scriptures and then to sit down and expound and teach based upon those scriptures. And that's just what he did that day. Now Bible scholars are not sure whether or not there was a set schedule of readings that was prescribed in the synagogue at this time. So it's not clear whether the portion that Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah was of his own choosing or part of such a cycle of readings. In any case the passage that Jesus read was one that would have been very familiar to those in the synagogue that day. It comes from the first two verses of Isaiah 61. "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."

As I mentioned, this part of Isaiah would have been very familiar to the Jews of Jesus' day. It was one of the several Hebrew scriptures that gave the people hope in the midst of their despair. It gave the people of God a sense of assurance that the way things were in their time, would not stay that way in God's time. So as Jesus sat down to teach on this promise of God, his listeners would have expected that the Rabbi Jesus would speak to them of this promised hope, encouraging them to continue to cling to it as a source of strength and encouragement. It's not unlike the hopes that we place in our leaders who speak to us of promises that the future is brighter than the present, that our hope for such a future should sustain us and inspire us to lift our heads above our current circumstances encouraging us to hold onto a promised brighter future. So Jesus' listeners that day were ready to be inspired, ready to be encouraged, ready to be hopeful.

But what happened was quite apart from that expectation. After Jesus finished reading, he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue attendant and sat down. "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." (Lk. 4:20) I imagine it as one of those pregnant pauses that is filled with anticipation and expectation. What would he have to teach us, this Jesus who we have known since he was a small boy, this Jesus the son of Joseph the carpenter and his wife Mary? I imagine that there was a sense of pride that this man who was one of them was so learned and full of knowledge and wisdom. What would he have to say about this ancient prophecy of Isaiah? Would he teach in a similar way to other rabbis who had taught on this passage, or would he have a new twist or take on it? Perhaps he would offer some new insight that would give them even more reason to hope in God's future.

No one there that day would have anticipated what Jesus said. In our Bibles this is what we read that he said. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Lk. 4:21) The key words are, "today" and "in your hearing." Here's how Eugene Peterson renders this sentence. "You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in

this place.” (*The Message*) What Jesus’ listeners would have heard is that this prophecy no longer looks to the future because it just became actual. They would have been stunned by this declaration. Even though they had been looking to this all of their lives as had their forebears before, the statement that it was now actualized would be incredible and unfathomable.

“God’s Spirit is on me; he’s chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free, to announce, ‘This is God’s year to act!’” (*The Message*) Some have suggested that by Luke’s placing this story at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, it can be understood as a mission statement of sorts, setting out what would be the result of Jesus’ coming into the world. But with his declaration that today in your hearing this has been fulfilled is more likely the way that Jesus was showing his purpose.

It’s like the coming, teaching, preaching, death and resurrection of Jesus was a new way for God to express his profoundly perfect love for the world and its inhabitants. In fact it was the ultimate expression of this enduring truth about God’s love. While this love had been expressed across the generations by the prophets, priests and kings anointed by God, the fulfillment of it all comes in Jesus.

Sometimes we today can in our lives of faith become complacent wait-ers, biding our time, focusing less on what is and more on what will be. And while it is indeed a calling of Christians to look forward in faith, we are not being true to our faith if we don’t live in the moment of today, demonstrating and therefore proclaiming that Jesus is the fulfillment of all that God has promised. That’s why Presbyterians are always among the first responders to natural disasters like the recent devastating earthquakes in Haiti. That’s why our mission efforts around the world are about giving a hand up rather than merely a handout. That’s why we live not in lockstep with the prevailing culture, but as companions in the culture, witnessing to God’s love in the way in which we use our spiritual gifts and our time, talent and resources.

The praise and adoration that we offer God in our worship through music, text, preaching and prayer are understood then to be in grateful response to God for the truth that already is, as well as that promise to which we hold fast as we look ahead. May our daily lives as disciples be as solidly resounding as the music and singing that we offer in our worship of God.