

What To Do With Good News

January 27, 2019: The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

The Rev. Emily Williams Guffey, Christ Church Detroit

[Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10](#); [Psalm 19](#); [Luke 4:14-21](#)

Recently a friend recounted his experience at a church service one day wherein the priest, at the beginning of his homily, said, "Someone asked me once if every sermon basically is, 'God loves you and wants you to do good.' And I said, 'Yes, that's about it.' So, that's your sermon today." And the priest sat down.

Admittedly the preacher was a Catholic priest, who by custom tend to preach shorter homilies. And admittedly the Mass that day included many baptisms, so there may have been reasons to keep the liturgy moving along. Imagine the church full of the glorious din of infants crying and cooing, of toddlers munching Cheerios and asking to go potty, and parents shushing and shuffling around, and perhaps the preacher didn't want to talk through that (although in my world that is just baseline noise--anything above that is bonus!) Or imagine that the priest was taking a page out of Jesus' book--from that time when Jesus took a page out of Isaiah's book, said for his sermon "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," and sat down.

Jesus read Isaiah's words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

To me, that will do for a sermon, any sermon, and the measure of our days, any day.

When was it that we have we proclaimed God's grace (another translation of the the "Lord's favor")? How have we made room for others, restructured our lives and privileges to provide for the freedom of all? When have we witnessed, to our amazement, sparks of possibility and hope when there was none? And what did we say about it? When and how have we brought the good news?

And what is "good"? I think of the words of Micah, who said, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good: [it is] to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). I think of Paul's words to the Philippians (4:8), that the "good" is what is true, what is just, what is pure, and I would add, what is real--and to think about these things, to orient our lives and energies, time and gifts, around these things. For there is enough in this world, this country, and this very neighborhood, to weigh us down, to perplex and wound us, to have us despair that evil and injustice are simply too pervasive that there's nothing we can do.

Indeed, to define "good" as merely polite, expected, and convenient does not hold a candle to evil. "Good" is real, it is true, it is decidedly inconvenient most of the time, and it will change your life.

Have you experienced the "good" here at Christ Church? Even in ninety days, I have; every day, I have. Have I touched and felt God in your care of our altar and worship, our bread and our wine, our linens and our flowers, these tangible marks of God among us? Have I heard whispers of heaven in your song? Have I understood God's Word better because you have communicated and taught the "sense of it" (Nehemiah 8:8)? Am I different because of your love and generosity? Have I been changed because of our encounter of God together in this place, your care for the most vulnerable, and your pursuit of justice? Absolutely. Have I been telling anyone and everyone about you and about how present God is here? Every chance I get.

I often think that to hold in the good news is like refraining to share a cure for terminal illness, for fear of not having the right words, or fear of what others would say or think, or simply not feeling strongly about it. Can you imagine? If you had in your heart and your mind the cure for cancer, wouldn't you tell somebody immediately? Wouldn't you want to shout it? Wouldn't you rejoice? Wouldn't it emerge from you? Because you would know that your and other lives could be changed and saved.

Jesus keeps his words short on this day because he's about to get out and do. This is, in Luke's account, the first day of his public ministry. The good news of God, sure as day, will not keep silent within him, but everything he goes on to say and do will be measured by these words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim God's grace." May it also be so with us. Amen.