

Epiphany Three C - 1/24/10
St. David's

In the name of the Holy Spirit, who came to Jesus and comes to us in our wilderness experiences, offering us a mission statement for our lives. Amen.

Give me that old time religion song.

“Give me that ol’ time religion. It was good enough for daddy. It was good enough for momma. It will take us all to heaven. And it’s good enough for me.”

Regardless of which flavors of Christianity you have experienced in your life, my guess is that each of them emphasized one of two things; nostalgia for the past or hope for the future. Listen to an evangelical preacher for any length of time and he will soon enough tell you how we have strayed from God’s path, how the world is going to hell in a handbasket because of today’s evil and perverse ways. The solution to fix our present time of Godlessness is always the same. Return to the way things used to be in the good ol’ days. The actual location of the good ol’ days varies from preacher to preacher and from evil to evil. But the common feature is that it is always in the past, a past that is viewed through some sort of magical rose colored glasses, when things were perfect and people correctly followed God’s direction. Two of the most popular times to return to are the Ozzie and Harriet 1950's and the time of this country’s founding, the late 19th century. The words to the old Negro Spiritual capture this religious jump from the fictional good ol’ days right to the future. “Give me that ol’ time religion because it will take us all to heaven.” Notice the steps in this religious process. Go back to the fast so you can leap frog to the future.

The problem with all this is that Gospel we just heard. Jesus has returned from his vision quest in the desert. His 40 days of fasting and soul searching has ended. He has come to terms with what it is he is supposed to do. He now understands his life call. What he will say today has to be as significant as anything that happens in all of the Gospels, because today Jesus presents us with his mission statement. What could be more important for a Christian than to know what Jesus understands as his life mission? What could possibly be more helpful in telling us how we should live our own lives?

What he uses to articulate his mission statement are quotes from his Bible, from Isaiah 61. Jesus sees Isaiah's words, with one major exception, as his mission in life. "Bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of God's favor." We learn just as much about how Jesus understands his mission by the one line in Isaiah 61 that he skips. In the middle of Isaiah's proclamation is also "The day of vengeance of our God" and Jesus jumps right to the next part.

But it is that last sentence of Jesus's sermon that makes me wonder about Christianity's constant obsession with the past and the future. "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." TODAY. In his summary statement of his life's mission, Jesus sets the focus not on yesterday or tomorrow but today. Religion for Jesus is not about reminiscing about the good ol' days or about waiting for our reward at a later time. Now is the time to change the way the world operates. Now is the time

to bring about the realm of God. Later in this Gospel Jesus will say it again. The realm of God he suggests, is not to be discovered in the past and not just to be longed for in the future, but the “realm of God is at hand.” The future, Jesus tells us, is now. The obvious question then is this. Why in the world have we wasted so much time longing for the past and waiting for the future when Jesus tells us in his mission statement that we are to focus on the here and now?

“Well, you see, that’s just what I’m talking about”, says my friend John, the agnostic. “Here is Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, announcing that this text from Isaiah has been fulfilled...today. Good news to the poor, my bleep. Freedom for those being oppressed, yeah right. Not only did those things not happen then, but here we are, 2000 years later, and the number of poor remains off the scale, we have more people in prisons than ever in the history of humanity, we still can’t cure blindness and we are still oppressing millions all over the planet. That’s not even mentioning this proclamation of the year of God’s favor. You know what that was? That was the Jubilee year, the year when property was to be restored to people who had lost it. It was the ultimate way to reverse the trend of certain people getting too much and no one else getting enough. Yeah, that is going to happen, isn’t it? We’re going to take away Ted Turner’s land and give it to the poor. What crap,” John said. “None of it has come true and it is not going to, today or tomorrow or anytime ever.”

For a Christian who sees our life focused on the past or the future, their answer to John the agnostic goes something like this; “You are taking today’s Gospel too

literally.” Jesus, they say, is not talking about finances, but rather spiritual poverty and religious captivity. He was talking about helping people accept him as their Lord and Savior. I, like my friend John, scoff at such an interpretation. Is that what Jesus’s mother meant in the Magnificat? Spiritual poverty? Luke continuously uses the words poor and oppressed throughout his Gospel. And when Luke says poor, he means economically disadvantaged or poor because of social class. When he says oppressed, he means people that are treated as less than human so that others can live in luxury. This, beloved, is no metaphorical text. There is no doubt that what Jesus is proclaiming today is a new age for the world’s suffering people.

What then, about John’s statement? He is, of course, right when he says that poverty and oppression did not go away when Jesus made this pronouncement. Does this mean that Jesus was full of hot air, making grandiose statements that he knew darn well could not be accomplished? And how could he possibly suggest that this was happening now and not in some distant future? As we will hear in next week’s Gospel, those listening to Jesus that day in the synagogue agreed with my friend John. They will run Jesus out of town on a rail.

My suggestion to John was that he consider a different pronouncement, a more recent one, in attempting to understand what it is Jesus is saying in his mission statement that focuses on today.

"...On the 1st day of January, all persons held as slaves within any State...that is in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free;

and the executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.”

Anyone know what that is? It is the opening of the Emancipation Proclamation made by Abraham Lincoln smack dab in the middle of the Civil War. Its utterance changed...absolutely nothing. Not a single slave was freed because the President stood up and said they were freed. Its authority was rejected by nearly all those holding human beings as property. It was totally disregarded.

But most historians would also suggest that this statement marks the beginning of the end. It calls for a state of being that did not yet exist. People ridiculed it. But it heralded what America *should* look like, and by stating it, freedom would eventually come for the captives.

As we all know so well, that process of freedom was a prolonged one. Even after the war ended and each individual was released from bondage, their freedom was still generations away. Blacks could work for their own money, but who was going to hire them? Decades later, most blacks continued to work for slave wages, and it wouldn't be until the Civil Rights movement 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, that oppression of blacks would even begin to end. And of course, the battle to fulfill the tenets of the Emancipation Proclamation continues right up to today.

It is the same for Jesus. The movement to bring freedom and liberty to the

oppressed does not end with his statement today, it begins. But make no mistake that it began THAT DAY. It is a proclamation that is given power only when we understand that this is not just Jesus's mission statement, but also ours. These words are Jesus's call to all of us to take up these causes as the central focus of *our* lives. What Jesus states today is nothing less than the very heart and soul of what it means to be a Christian. And that heart is never centered in the past or longing for the future. It is something that we take up in the here and now. We are called to make this vision a reality in our world today. What Jesus knew all too well is that nostalgia is blind and longing for the future makes us inert. If we are going to bring about God's realm, you and I must live in the present.

Nine years ago, on this very day, I stood before this congregation for the first time. I'd like to tell you that it was all planned out. I'd like to tell you that I set it all up in advance so that we could begin our ministry together on this Sunday with these readings. But the truth is that I was finishing up my last seminary paper in Berkeley when the phone rang. January 18? The voice said. Will that work for you? Susan Wiltsey and my ordination was set for a Thursday evening, and there was never any question in Jean's or my mind that we would choose to begin our ministry with you immediately after ordination.

It was only then that I opened the lectionary to see today's readings. I started crying. The central message of what it means to be a Christian on our first Sunday together. Here is an excerpt from what I said to that small, hearty group of you nine

years ago. “Today, Jesus gives us his charge. We are a people called to proclaim the gospel, the good news of Jesus. We can first proclaim that good news by making ourselves a household name in this community, by making our church available to all, by becoming aware of the needs of this community and fulfilling those needs. To accomplish this of course, we must first grow this church. We WILL make St. David’s a home for all, as Jesus taught us. And as we grow in numbers, we WILL break the chains of oppression in Page, we CAN help to liberate those who suffer here from underemployment and those forgotten or not cared for by others. We WILL bring a new life and energy to this community and assist those who have been blinded by pain, poverty, and oppression to help all of us see a new future. In short, we CAN bring the reign of God to Page as Jesus tells us.”

Of course, that proclamation did not come true that day. But it happened, fully and completely, because the people gathered here stopped worrying about their jaded past and stopped longing for a distant future. The future became now. And it all happened. You have become the household name we strived to become. You have grown this church in numbers far beyond anyone’s wildest expectations. You have utilized that growth to spread the good news to all corners of this community and the surrounding reservation. You have helped restore dignity and honor to thousands of people in this tiny place. You have liberated so many from suffering and lifted up so many more who had been neglected for so long. You have responded to the words of today’s Gospel and I could not be more proud to be a part of what you’ve done.

But as with the Emancipation Proclamation, the challenge to live Jesus's mission statement is just beginning. Today, on this historic Sunday for us, we need to move to the next step. We have done an unbelievable job in addressing the individual needs of so many people. Now, it is time to address the systemic causes of poverty and oppression in our little town. We need to identify the root causes that have allowed such suffering to perpetuate in our community and then reverse them.

When you remember that our focus must never be on the past or longing for the future, we will continue to live into Jesus's mission statement. If you can stay laser focused on bringing justice and peace to all of the world, then St. David's will continue to flourish and bring about the realm of God.

Finally, let us remember that this mission we are given today by Jesus himself is not easy. John the agnostic as well as many of our fellow Christians will remind us of that. They will tell us that what we have done to this point hardly makes a dent in the injustice and suffering in our world. But Paul, in that beautiful image of the Body of Christ in today's Epistle, shows us just how to bring Jesus's mission statement to fruition. We do it together. We work as a team, using our own individual skills to be Christ's body not in the good ol' days or in the future but now. The old time religion may have been good enough for others, but it is not good enough for Jesus or for us. Beloved, the Spirit is upon us. Let us move our religion out of the past and into the future of now. Amen.