

If I mention a year to you like “1492” or “1776”—even the non-historians among us will be able to conjure up images of three ships sailing toward a new world or of patriots gathered in Philadelphia to stand against tyranny, along with an array of emotions and events that go along with those images. The year 586 BCE was that kind of year in Old Testament history, except that it is remembered for much sadder reasons. It was the year when it all came unglued for the Israelites, as the Babylonian army marched into Jerusalem and destroyed the city, including Solomon's Temple. That Temple was more than just any building, much more than any church or cathedral or even a place like the Vatican. It was believed to be *the* place where God lived—the navel of the world. The Temple dominated the old city of Jerusalem and at its center was the “holy of holies,” the place where the Divine could be encountered.

In 586, many of the religious and political leaders were carted off to Babylon, and there by the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, they wept. That is what we mean when we speak of the Babylonian exile. They *couldn't* sing the Lord's song anymore, for how can you sing when your heart is broken? As is so often the case, deep emotions require poetry rather than prose. To get a theological and emotional sense of the importance of what that was all about, you can read Psalm 137. It's filled with pathos, grief, loss, shame, fear, doubt and a desire for vengeance. It isn't a noble sentiment but it's real; people in that much pain cannot help but wish upon those who have caused them such pain an opportunity to know what it feels like.

The destruction of Jerusalem and of that Temple caused a major crisis of faith. It seemed as if the Babylonian gods must be stronger and more powerful than YHWH. Or if that was not the case, then it raised an even harder question: why had God allowed this to happen? But of course that is not the end of the story of God's people. In fact, out of that grief came some of the greatest and most profound poetry in all of Scripture. From the pain of the exile, what eventually emerged was hope. One of my favorite texts in all of Scripture is the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, which announces more than half a century after the Exile that God is making a highway in the desert to lead those exiles home. To Christian ears it's hard to hear those words apart from the lives and ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, especially if you have George Frederick Handel's melodies ringing in your ears. But initially the words of Isaiah are about refugees coming home from Babylon. “*Comfort, comfort ye my people says your God...speak tenderly to Jerusalem.*” These words of good news, spoken to a weary people decades after 586, imagine how a people who could barely stand on their own two feet will be able, with God's help, to run and not grow weary, to walk and not faint. Now I know that hope alone doesn't take us all the way to the nitty-gritty work of ministry; but without hope we have nothing. *Hope* is one of the big three for Christians—right up there at the top with faith and love. Technocrats will not “fix” what ails the Church. The next and latest “program” for church growth or for Christian education or music is not what we yearn for in our hearts. We begin with faith, hope, and love, and *everything* else grows out and up from there.

But hope is not the same as wishful thinking. I think the difference is that wishful thinking is passive, while hope mobilizes us to act. Hope inspires commitment and hard work. So I think that is where we are as we listen to today's Old Testament reading, gathered with the people of Israel after the Exile has ended and they have come back home to rebuild their lives. We find them standing at the Water Gate of Jerusalem (not to be confused with the Watergate Hotel in Washington!) on this third Sunday after Epiphany and we are invited to join Ezra, the priest, and

Nehemiah, the governor, and all the people in the square as Ezra brings the scroll of the Torah and reads it and interprets it to all of the people, both women and men. After which all the people stood up and said, “amen, amen” which can be translated: *let's do this! I agree! So be it!* Together the religious and political leaders come together to begin the necessary work of rebuilding what will eventually become the Second Temple in Jerusalem. But of course their rebuilding project is about more than bricks and mortar; it is also about the re-formation of God's people in ways that reflect their experience of the Exile. They can't go back to the way things were; only forward.

So what happens next? The time period after Ezra and Nehemiah, after the work of rebuilding the Temple and the city of Jerusalem, was a time for new questions and opportunities, a time of ferment in what scholars call the Second Temple period. Second Temple Judaism was a time of great theological debate over serious missional questions: what did it mean to be a faithful Jew and what purpose did God now have for Israel? There were different answers, depending on who you asked. The great gift of the Old Testament is that it preserves that richness and diversity by refusing to settle matters into the responses of the loudest voices or the most well-connected. Eventually it is into that context that a first-century Jew named Jesus of Nazareth steps, in the shadow of Roman imperial power. We glimpse that young man in today's gospel reading three years before the events of Holy Week and his death and resurrection: Jesus as teacher, prophet, and reformer within the Jewish faith tradition of his parents and grandparents.

A *synagogue* is not the same as the Temple. The rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem under Ezra and Nehemiah would later go through even greater renovations during the reign of Herod the Great. Jesus would be presented there when he was forty-days old and return again as a twelve-year old for his bar mitzvah and ultimately return there for a Passover pilgrimage in the final weeks of his life. But the synagogues were more like town halls and all over the Palestine of Jesus' day. I got to stand in the ruins of a third-century synagogue not far from Nazareth just about a week ago. The space wasn't that much bigger than this room, with seating around three sides. It was meant to be a place for debate and conversation, for holy arguing; not a place for religious sacrifice like the Temple.

So today when we encounter Jesus in Luke's Gospel, he has been busy teaching and healing in and around the Sea of Galilee and proclaiming the Kingdom of God, which no one really fully understands because it is such an elusive reality; something that at best people get glimpses of. One thing seems clear, however: it's not merely a synonym for “heaven.” It's not just the place you go when you die! It breaks in, here and now, *on earth as it is in heaven*. And you can see it sometimes if you know where to look: it's kind of like a mustard seed that isn't yet come to fruition as a place where the birds of the air can rest, but nevertheless it's growing in that direction. Or, it's like when a young adult who has gone through a very hard stretch in her life but then she comes home and is greeted with wide-open arms and there is veal piccata for everyone because she was lost and is now found. (In the modern telling of that story she has become a vegan so it's tofu piccata but you get the point!) *Jesus brings health to peoples' lives in body, mind and spirit*. So all of those healing stories, too, are signs of the Kingdom of God breaking in.

Word naturally begins to spread in and around the Lake where Jesus has been preaching and teaching and healing, in those small towns like Cana and Capernaum. Word spreads quickly in small towns of course, even without the assistance of the internet or a text-messaging plan. So it isn't long before word gets back to his hometown of Nazareth. Jesus returns home amid great expectation and if you close your eyes I bet you can almost feel the electricity as he walks into that synagogue in Nazareth, as he stands among the people who knew him from the time he was a little kid. I imagine that his teachers and friends are all there; and the girl he took to the Nazareth High prom (and the one he wanted to ask but was too afraid, along with the one who hoped he'd ask her but he never did.) The people there know his parents not as saints carved in marble, but simply as Miriam and Yusef. And don't forget that the neighbors weren't buying the whole Virgin birth thing; as far as they were concerned Jesus' had been born amid rumors and whispers that people in a small-town don't ever forget. It can be very difficult to go back home; to be "famous" among people who know you so well. Anyone who has grown up in a small town knows there is a paradox: people like to claim as their own someone who "makes it," but on the other hand don't like it when one of their own seems to be getting too big for their britches.

Luke tells us that Jesus came back home to Nazareth and he stood in that synagogue and he unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. I had an opportunity while in Jerusalem to walk into the Israeli Museum and walk around a kiosk on which was displayed a replica of that same scroll of Isaiah, one recovered as part of the Dead Sea scrolls. It's about 21 feet long and eighteen inches or so wide. Jesus unrolls that scroll, past the fortieth chapter that I already mentioned to a place near the very end—words from the sixty-first chapter that are addressed to the community some time after they have been home a while and rebuilt the Temple and are now trying to figure out who they are and what kind of people God is calling them to become. He finds where it is written:

"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."

In choosing those words, Jesus sets his own life and ministry (and ultimately his death and resurrection) within the context of that work. The reason he gets people so riled up, I think, is that he adds one more word. *Now*. He says this isn't something that can be postponed to some distant future: the time for bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives, the time for the blind to see and the oppressed to go free, the time for the Year of Jubilee, is *Now*.

Now Biblical interpretation is never an exact science. But if you read my annual report in the collection of reports that have been prepared for this weekend's Annual Meeting (and I pray that all of you will do that) then you will notice that I've taken this larger Biblical narrative and tried to interpret some of the events of the last twelve years or so that I've been there rector here at St. Francis. I won't repeat that here, but very briefly it is to suggest that over the course of this first decade of the third millennium we have moved from a time of loss and grief through a pretty major building project and to the dawn, I think, of a new day. This pattern shouldn't come as a

big surprise; for it is a variation on the theme of what we proclaim as the Paschal mystery: *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again*. Our lives tend to bear witness that same pattern: that new life grows out of grief and loss, which is simply to say that *God is never finished with us*. We are not a people of the status quo but a people of the new thing that God is doing in our midst. Death never gets the last word. We are, therefore, a people of hope, hope that inspires us to action and mission, and it is there that we discover (and rediscover) our identity. If the world around us feels like it is coming unglued it is not our job to hold things together at all costs, but to allow ourselves to be healers and reconcilers in the midst of it all.

The good news that comes from Jesus walking into that synagogue 2000 years ago, or of being made known to us in the breaking of the bread here today, is that there is work we are called to share in his name. *Now*. In the midst of a changing Episcopal Church and a changing world we don't have to agree on every matter of interpretation or doctrine. But our mission is not merely words on a piece of paper: we are called to live out of hope, by deed and action, this message of good news in the wider world beyond these walls. *Now*. To proclaim and live the gospel, to proclaim release to the captives, to participate in the healing and wholeness that makes God known to a disbelieving world. And if we seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness then all the rest will work itself out.

There is a place and a role for each and every one of us as members of Christ's body in doing that work that God has given us to do. Today's collect provides a nice, short summary of what I have tried to say to you today in the name of God today. Let me finish by reminding you of that collect, with which we began, by inviting you to make it your own prayer in this New Year. Let us pray:

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.