



North Shore
**Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Today”

Rev. Julie Sheridan-Smith – Preaching

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Luke 4:14-21

January 27, 2019

Some of you have heard this story, but years ago - I remember waking up one morning to an internal thought or voice that simply said, “Read the Book.”

Now I have to tell you, I did not grow up *reading* the Bible. Yes, of course, I had encountered it in homilies or the sermons I heard growing up as we were regular church goers and our “Sunday school” didn’t happen on Sunday morning. So, I grew up sitting in the pews with my parents and 5 siblings.

And my father was known to ask, in the middle of a debate or situation, “Does this meet with Christ’s core message?” I knew that message of Christ more through the spoken word on Sunday and the experience of love I had in my family - than from a core message I had gleaned from reading the Bible myself. But somehow, in *that* waking moment I knew “the book” was the Bible. And something about that was *so* compelling that I went out and bought one.

I started reading and had *no idea* why or how to make sense of it. And I picked it up and put it down many times...

Some years later after Tom and I, with our children, joined the Congregational church in Wauwatosa I started teaching the preschool Sunday school class and we used the very same Bible that we give to our families as a Baptism gift...I LOVED it!

Trying to offer something of this to children began the path toward a degree in Theology and a Master of Divinity. I kept discovering that this wasn’t just a book, but a living story of God and us. A story that wasn’t just something to learn about, but something to live.

And even more, I *continue* to discover that sharing it together, as we do on Sundays, and around the table with others on Thursdays brings meaning and purpose to how I live every day. Don’t get me wrong, I also LOVE my personal reading and study time, but it always draws me

toward others. And that is what is happening in both of our readings today; people are gathered to worship God and hear from the Word.

Two weeks ago I spoke of Jesus' Baptism - noting that we know almost nothing about what Jesus had been doing before he is baptized, except that he is (as we are) *completely* beloved. And this is the *starting* point for the life and work of Jesus.

Today, we are with Jesus who has returned after 40 days in the wilderness and, filled with the Spirit, has been preaching in synagogues around the Galilea. He has gained some reputation for this and has now returned to his own hometown, and goes - on the Sabbath to preach in the synagogue there among people he grew up with.

Jesus reads some very old words from Isaiah, ancient history really. Words I am sure the people in the synagogue have heard before as he says. "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news..." and he reads a list that concludes with being freed from oppression - which translates from the Greek as brokenness or being crushed. This translation of oppression sums up not only everything on the list but the whole condition of that which breaks or crushes our spirit. Yet, to all this Isaiah says - good news will come.

I imagine like us, the people in that synagogue were *hungry* for good news. But then Jesus says, "Today - this is fulfilled - right now." These ancient words and promises are alive in him. And there seems to be an immediacy to that pronouncement of *Today* which *could* cause us to be full of hope... or a bit ho hum, I've heard this before...or frankly filled with despair and disbelief. Because what does *today* mean?

And, while I am anchored in a faith and lived experience that tells me that *in* Jesus God's intention *is* fulfilled and will be fulfilled. I am grateful that *today* I *know* --- That God dwells in me and in you and in those who are not in this room. God dwells in the music and prayers today... in the Word and interpretation. God dwells in those we know and in those we do not know. God *dwells* in comfort and peace. God dwells in the broken and crushed.

And, even our call to worship reminds us that God's glory is heard also without words, that nature proclaims it! I was reminded of this last week when I got up in the middle of the night to see the Lunar Eclipse...amazing! Even the cold but beautiful snow... even the pictures of sunsets and beaches that our friends in warmer climes post on Facebook that fill us with longing for summer speak of God's creating purpose.

The Spirit of the Lord is also upon me and upon you-

But - can you picture the people sitting in the synagogue with this Jesus who grew up among them, looking up him at him as he spoke these words...looking around and saying, "Aha- yes, I see it now. Today the poor and hungry are *filled* by good news, all that has broken or crushed us has been wiped away." Do they clap their hands with a satisfied, "Good, all done."

I don't think so, for soon after this Jesus is being run out of town.

Perhaps *because* they thought they knew him so well...they do not see or understand the fullness of who he is and what he offers.

Do *we* ever feel that we know God so well that we know what to expect from God, or the church, or from each other for that matter?

Perhaps at times this too confounds our own prayers and expectations, when we get caught up in the immediacy of today and lose sight of today as just a beginning.

Listening closely, we have heard that Jesus “*began* to say to them- today this is fulfilled...” We don’t hear the rest of his sermon, but we know a fair amount about the way he continued to fulfill the good news through his actions.

Now this is not at all to say that we should not enjoy the “right now” We are here in this beauty and warmth with wonderful people we love and good music to help us enjoy and worship God. And again, our first reading points that out- what we are experiencing right here and now is holy... *this* day is holy.

Nehemiah reminds us to take joy in the gifts God has given. For joy of the Lord is our strength. But it is also a reminder for us for this afternoon, for the today that comes tomorrow; joy, and to live well, involves others being enabled to live well. This is just one of the ways we love and worship God. And in that way - each today is holy. As Alice Walker wrote, “Anybody can observe the Sabbath, but making it holy surely takes the rest of the week.”

Remember, Jesus proclaimed - the good news is fulfilled *today* in him...and he also got up off his seat in the synagogue and expressed God’s love in both words and actions every day. He lived his mission with compassion. Frederick Buechner, who we are reading in the Tuesday book group wrote, to have compassion is to live in the “...knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.” We speak the good news not only with words.

From the prophet Jeremiah we hear, “Choose this day whom you will serve.” We have *the choice* to live out the good news as best we can each day. *Choose* today, every day.

What if we begin each day living our church purpose statement - adding just one word? *Today*, our purpose is to grow and deepen Christian discipleship in a faith community guided by the Holy Spirit. How does that day look to you?

What if every day we woke up singing, Today, *this* day is holy, and God’s joy is ours.

Why don’t we stand up today with Jesus and say, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because *he* has anointed us to bring good news...and then stand with him and behave as if *today* this is fulfilled through him - in us. Choose this day, every today, whom you will serve! Not with a sense of urgent anxiety but with confidence in who you are: God’s beloved - called by Jesus.

Our church covenant carries in it a bit of the good news Jesus proclaimed. In closing, let’s hear our covenant, with a small twist. Today... We confess our love for God, for Jesus Christ, and for our fellow men and women. Today we hereby *covenant* to live in the fellowship of the Gospel, to walk in the ways of the Lord—known and to be made known — Today, to share in the

worship and work of the Church, to cooperate with it in all good enterprises, and promote its service, its maintenance, its purity, and its peace, today.”

In and with Jesus, the Spirit of the Lord is also upon me and upon you, each and every today.
Amen.