

January 24, 2016 / Season after Epiphany / David L. Edwards

**The Inward Journey, The Outward Journey,
and Our Life Together**

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 *For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.*

Psalms 19 *The heavens are telling the glory of God....*

1 Corinthians 12:12-31 *Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.*

Luke 4:14-21 *Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

Since this is my last Sunday with you, I struggled a good bit with what to say. There was an inclination to give a kind of "State of the Community" sermon, with highlights of the past thirteen years. That is not really my style. For over forty years I have spent each week studying scripture and preparing sermons. Among you these years, sharing the same commitments and life, the sermon process has become for me even more vital and rich. My weekly study and sermon preparation arises from the life that we share together as a covenant community. And so that is what I will do today, as I have done each Sunday. It is a calling I have, to search the scriptures in light of the life of faith in its inward and outward dimensions. It is our spiritual work, and will continue to be, to listen for the living Word of God that enlightens, guides, sustains, and frees us to be who God created us to be.

The inward journey is about listening for God's Word to us in and through our scriptures, and the creation. In the reading from Nehemiah, the people of Israel have just returned from exile in Babylon. They are rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, as well as their lives. It has been a devastating time in their life as a people of faith, and the work before them is daunting.

The wall around Jerusalem has just been completed. The priest Ezra gathers the people at the western gate of the city. It is far enough from the temple so that even those who have become, for whatever reasons, ritually defiled and unable to worship in the temple can be present for this event. It is the reading of all the law of God, and this would include,

probably, the stories of God's saving acts in the past. The people seem to feel a deep need to hear their scriptures, so Ezra organizes the event. It is a kind of "teach in". Not only are the scriptures read, but there are teachers present to "give the sense" of the scriptures. The reading and study of scripture takes on-going learning and teaching and interpreting.

As the scriptures are read, the people weep. I find this whole story and this weeping to be deeply moving. Why do they weep as they listen to the reading and the teaching? Considering what they have just come through as a people, two generations of exile away from their homeland. Then there is the hard work they face with rebuilding their temple, their lives, and their city. I think that the weeping comes from hearing of God's steadfast love and care for them shown through the giving of the law.

The law for Israel was never understood as something heavy and externally imposed upon them. It was their light, their life. We hear this in the psalm for today. The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The law and precepts of God are like gold, and sweeter than honey. The words guide us, make us wise, and help us to see things more clearly. This is not the view of scripture we have today. Scripture is used by many as a weapon against others, as they selectively draw from it words that suit their anger, hate, and desire to justify their own violence. At the same time, the Bible is rejected by many who have never read and studied it for themselves. They reject the Bible because they hear it misused by the more popular and public voices of "Christianity".

This is why it is important that membership in our community includes a commitment to the regular or daily reading and study of the Bible. We know that working on a regular basis and to a deeper level with our scriptures brings light and life. It is not a quick and easy thing. It takes discipline over a long period of time. I hope that in the future you will continue to take the study of scripture seriously. I hope that the Wednesday morning worship and study will not only continue but will find more of you attending. I hope that mission groups in their meetings will include at least the reading, if not also some discussion, of scripture, perhaps the weekly lectionary readings. And I hope that each of you will renew regular reading of the Bible as part of your spiritual practice.

Our scriptures contain things that are troubling, puzzling, and some that need to be rejected. However, the heart and soul, the dominant message, of scripture is the steadfast and compassionate love of God, present and working in all of life, and for us, embodied in Jesus who shows us the way of living as God created us to live.

However, the living Word of God is not only heard in and through our scriptures. It is also heard in the creation. The first part of Psalm 19 tells us that the whole creation is

“telling the glory of God” and “proclaiming God's handiwork”. It is the “voiceless voice” that we hear when we are open to and in nature, with quiet minds and hearts. We are then receptive to God's presence and voice throughout the universe.

Listening to the creation of which we are a part makes us increasingly aware that we belong to a web of life, that we are part of the interconnectedness of all that God has created and continues to create. Yet we live in a culture that is disconnected from nature, from the creation, and destructive of it. That we live so harmfully toward our very home is symptomatic of a dis-ease in our souls. This sense of disconnectedness from the earth, from our creational environment, is amplified by our obsession with the world of electronics. Earlier and earlier are our children being drawn into the virtual world of computers, smart phones, and the like, all of them highly useful and in their own way, within limitations, a true gift to us. However, children, young people, and adults have lost that vital, life-giving and life-sustaining, connection with the world of nature, which we call the creation. And we suffer needlessly because of it. A loss of imagination. A loss of sensation—touching, feeling, smelling, seeing, hearing—with regard to all that surrounds us. A loss of delight and joy. And, as our scriptures tell us in many places, the loss of the profound and humbling sense of the Sacred, what we call God.

How fortunate we are to be in this place, within these forty acres of urban forest, preserved long ago by those who had a vision of what was being lost and what had to be sustained and protected. Children always have and always will need to be out of doors in order to grow fully as human beings. Here children will always have a place to play and learn in nature. And here people will have a place to come and renew their spirits within the creation, to touch their truest, deepest selves within the world God has made.

We are a community of the inward journey, and central to that journey is listening. Listening to the life-giving Word we hear in scripture and in the world God has made, of which we are part.

We are a community of the outward journey of service to others and the world. Jesus has been baptized by John and has gone into the wilderness for a time of testing, of soul-searching, of deep listening to God. He comes out of the desert and goes to his hometown of Nazareth. There he worships in the synagogue. As an honored guest, he is invited to read the portion of scripture for the day and to give the teaching. He is handed the scroll of the book of the prophet Isaiah. The words are those of the Servant of God who is sent to give God's word and inaugurate God's order of life. The spirit of God is on this Servant, who is anointed to bring good news to the poor, release to the imprisoned, recovery of sight

to the blind, and liberation to the oppressed.

Jesus then sits down to give the teaching, which is the custom. Everyone is looking expectantly at him. His first words are: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” He identifies himself with this reading, with this mission. The people have heard this reading before, probably many times. It is a lovely and hopeful reading. But Jesus now tells them that these words are happening right now, even as they hear them. Now is the time for God's word and work to be made a reality. Good news to the poor, not blaming the poor, not increasing their poverty and creating more poor people, as fewer and fewer people have the most wealth. Release to prisoners, not throwing more people into prison and not building prisons for profit. Restoring sight to the blind, the work of healing people in body, mind, and spirit. Freeing people from all kinds of oppression.

When we listen for God's living Word in scripture and in the creation around us, we will be called in some way to be part of what Jesus has announced—the time of God's reign in all of life. The reign of compassion, of justice, of healing, and of liberation. We are a community of the outward journey that flows from the inward journey. And each of us is and will be called and empowered to be a channel of God's reign of love. We as a community are called to be part of what Jesus has proclaimed and inaugurated—the realm of God in human life.

We are also called to be a community of love, manifesting how we are all made to live together as human beings. We listened this morning to the second portion of Paul's all-important twelfth chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians. This chapter is at the heart of our life and vision as a community. God's spirit lives in the community of Jesus giving birth to a variety of callings and gifts and ministries. Diversity, not uniformity. Many, not one. Now Paul likens the community to the human body. Our bodies are not made up of one, or even just a few, members or parts, but many. We could not live as human beings without this many-ness and diversity. Everything works together, the seemingly most important as well as the seemingly least important members. In fact, there is NO unimportant or inessential member.

Given this physiological fact, it is the same with the community of God's love made known in Jesus. There can be no boasting. There can be no bullying. There can be no one view or opinion dominating the others. There can be no competition--”What I am called to do is more important than what you are called to do.” There must be mutual respect, and beyond that, encouragement. And there must be a sharing of experiences. If one members is suffering, the whole community feels the pain. If one member is honored, the whole community celebrates it.

Our community as always striven to live in this way, with a special attentiveness to those who may be judged “weak” or “inferior” by our society. We believe, and seek to live in a way, that each and every person has something essential to offer us as a community. Also, each and every person is called to share in the mutual respect and honoring that Paul talks about. We all share responsibility for cultivating a community wherein each person is seen as a gift, where each person has some calling and some gift to offer as an expression of God's love for the world, where no one dominates and all are included. It is an ongoing process of growth in love. And that is where our reading for this morning leaves us, for Paul is leading up to something which we will hear in next week's reading. It is the greatest of gifts for which all of us are to strive. It is love.

So, our readings for today are ongoing offerings from our scriptures that enrich and nourish our lives as persons and as a community. The inward life of listening deeply—within ourselves, within the creation, within scripture—for the living Word of God that enlightens, guides, and upholds us. The outward life of serving others and the world according to the realm of God, God's will for life—justice, mercy, compassion, peace, healing. And continuing to learn and to grow in our capacity to live out God's love in community with one another.

May God continue to bless and guide us, to inspire and energize us, and to give us joy in this life to which we are called in Jesus, our true lives as human beings.