

Most of the refrain of Joni Mitchell's *Big Yellow Taxi* goes like this: *Don't it always seem to go, that you don't know what you've lost 'til it's gone.* There's nothing like a snow storm of historic proportions to make us realize the truth of those statements. As we go about our day to day life, we aren't usually conscious of the faceless strangers who facilitate our ability to navigate the world. Not one of us could be here this morning without snow plows and vehicles that can navigate in poor conditions. And not one snow plow would be effective without the engineers who designed it and the scores of people who implemented it: from pattern makers to tool and dye makers, to manufacturers, to assembly plant workers, to distributors, to those who had the foresight to buy one, to those who instruct how to operate one, to the one who actually operates it and has the ability to remove the snow from our path. I think you catch my drift, pun intended. So many people make our presence here this morning possible and there are many more who are at the ready to keep us safe should we need them in an emergency.

So it was for the people in our reading from the Hebrew Scripture. They were a people who had been in exile. They were a people whose capitol, Jerusalem had been utterly destroyed - Jerusalem, where the

Temple of God had stood, destroyed. After generations, when they were allowed to return, Nehemiah was permitted to rebuild what was lost. This is where our story this morning picks up.

Notice that our reading shows us how the ancient people worshipped. All were gathered together in one place, not just men; women and children too. Not just the ritually pure; the unpure as well. For the first time in generations they heard the Word of God read to them. I imagine that this must have been what it was like for believers in the former Soviet Union - returning to church for the first time in 50+ years, they would have heard the Word of God proclaimed out loud. They stood, as we stand when we hear the Gospel, because they knew, as we know, that God is present among them. After all, it is the Word OF God, not the Word FROM God!

When they were blessed, they raised their hands in praise and affirmed the blessing: Amen, Amen; so be it, so be it. As they worshipped, they prostrated themselves. The priests did more than translate the Word of God, they interpreted it so that God's people could understand it.

Understanding it, the people wept. Why?

We cannot know definitively. Maybe it was tears of joy, as they recovered their understanding of God and knew they were in God's

presence. Maybe it was tears of sorrow, as they understood how much they had lost and for how long. Perhaps it was tears of shame, as they realized how far they had strayed from what God wants from us. What we have a sense of is that the people presented their whole selves to God, without reservation, and they were transformed in the process. Ezra understood this as a moment for rejoicing not weeping, urges them to feast and enjoy themselves, sharing out of their abundance with those who have nothing.

Such a moment of rejoicing may have also been present with Jesus in Luke's version of Jesus teaching in the temple. Jesus, too, interprets what he has read out of Isaiah. Luke makes it very plain that Jesus has come to heal the broken hearted, to announce the release of prisoners, from whatever they find themselves imprisoned; to restore sight to those who have been blind to God's reality; and to announce the inbreaking of God's Kingdom. Jesus is letting the hometown crowd know that he is more than just Mary and Joseph's kid, that there is more to him than just a tradesman: he is a prophet, the Messiah, a wounded healer.¹ There must

¹ Linda McKinnish Bridges, "Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Vol. 1 Year C*, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., (Westminster John Knox: Louisville KY) 2009. 289.

have been something like an electrical current in the room as Jesus read - he was more than reading, he was talking about himself. When Jesus sat down, the assembled just stared at him, expectant. Jesus, too, felt the current, acknowledging it he said, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Imagine the murmurs that happened then! Did Jesus' neighbors notice that he left out a portion of the Isaiah reading? The portion that speaks to the vengeance of our God to those who do not look after the poor? Do they realize that Jesus comes to bring healing and forgiveness as well as good news to the poor? Do we?

Our reading from today's Gospel is the entirety of Luke's Gospel in miniature. Luke wants us to know just who Jesus is, of what the church will be and do, and what the response ought to be to Jesus and the church. The measure of our success as a parish church, then, is not how many people show up for Sunday worship, not how many pledging units we have, not even how many we have baptized. Rather, our yardstick is how well we live into Jesus' mission. Have we brought good news to the poor? Have we worked to remove strictures that oppress, have we done our part to usher in God's Kingdom?

For those of us here today, we have overcome some serious obstacles to be here. It is clearly important to us that some of our brothers and sisters have somewhere warm to go and have enough food to eat. Your presence here allows us to be your servant and gives us an opportunity to be as Christ to you. May we travel together as pilgrims, bringing good news to all and setting us free from those things that imprison us, keeping us away from the love of God. May we bring our whole selves to worship today, and allow ourselves to be transformed.

Amen.