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Squamish United Church

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Readings:

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

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Luke 4:14-21

Introduction to Scripture

The scriptures we are about to read speak to time, context and interpretation. We will begin in Nehemiah where Ezra speaks in the midst of a long and discouraging process of rebuilding after the Exile. The people of the community have gathered, for a reading of the Torah. And the reaction of the people in hearing the reading and interpretation of the law was to weep as they grieved what they had lost. For upon hearing the old, old story they began to remember that which they had all but forgotten. They recalled that which named and claimed them. And today like them, we remain a people of the book, of the story. Like them, we often forget or neglect our story. Sometimes when we come to this place we too find ourselves weeping, and sometimes it is because we weep for the story of life we have almost forgotten. The kind of story that Paul lays out for us in Corinthians. The story of faith, community and unity in the midst of diversity. The reminder that the light of Christ shines brightest as we allow life to be present for all the members of the body of Christ. Unity in diversity speaks light to the world. And we find the center of our faith laid out for us in the scriptures and in the life of Jesus. From Luke we will read Jesus' inaugural sermon in his hometown synagogue. He reads from the scripture which has become both the greatest friend and the greatest enemy of the community of faith. Anthony Robinson says "Everything that would challenge us most deeply is right here, right there, in this odd, disordered and difficult book, a book that reads us as much as we read it. Jesus reads from Isaiah to remind Israel of its core mission or its vocation, to be a blessing to all the people's of the earth, to bring good news to the poor and healing to the broken. Jesus interprets himself and us in the reading of the word.

May our ears be opened, may our hearts be filled, may our lives be transformed as we live into our story. Amen

The living Word

I will never forget the first time I sat in synagogue worship service. The people were gathered a little like we are today - facing one another but after the scripture was read a rabbi did not stand up and tell them what to believe the congregation began to discern and interpret for themselves. I grew up in such a tradition and it was one of its greatest strengths and at times weaknesses when it was not discerned together in the body. In Ezra, in the synagogue, and in my Christian tradition people related the Scriptures to events that were happening in their own lives, in the lives of the community and in the world. In Nehemiah, Ezra brought forth the scripture and the people began to interpret it. And in the interpretation and reading they began to discover this ancient text was relevant to their lives. It moved them to tears, and then to hope and joy.

Is that how we hear the text today? We are still people of the book - we place it in the front of our sanctuary and read from it each week. But perhaps like the people lost in exile in a time where their faith was not held up high in the world in which they lived we too have forgotten our story of faith. How could it be that the reading of the law brought surprise and joy? One might wonder how we could put law and joy even in the same sentence. I don't think we can if we forget the purpose of the text is to open us up to God in time and place.

Just as it was for Ezra and later for Jesus and again for Paul the law, life, and letters require interpretation to make sense of things and that interpretation requires involvement. The scripture has not lasted this long because it was a good read. When we read scriptures we find things that have meaning to us and point us towards a source of hope. In different readings and narrative we notice different things. Sometimes we find ourselves searching for 'the meaning' of the text until we later discover in a different time and place the text has an entirely different meaning - that does not make it less true -for me it brings a deeper truth. The scriptures call us to liberation in the time and place we are. When we read the bible we are to discover who we are. The God who liberates us calls us into our fullest expression of self.

I believe that is the example Jesus gave when he stepped into the synagogue in his hometown and read ¹⁸“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, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” Jesus is not just interpreting scripture here he is interpreting himself. He is using scripture to find the language to do that.

Meaning emerges in the immediate direct encounter between the reader and the word. And so as context changes meaning changes.

Peter Short holds up the image of the spirit as “free and wild and not in captivity - not even the captivity of the church as we know it.” Ezekiel offers us the image of the Spirit rising up from the church, overflowing its walls and rushing out into the wilderness. Short says “the one who would hold the center must first get a grip on letting the center go.” He goes on to remind us that the way we have always done things is not necessarily the way the spirit is moving us today. “Religion doesn’t create the Spirit - the spirit already exists.” Short goes on to say “My deepest gratitude is because the center is NOT dependent on us. That is our hope! That the center, wherever it is, is still free/undomesticated, wild.” I believe that if the center was dependent on us we would die of lack of hope, the darkness would overcome the light. Maybe I am wrong in that but what I know is that without faith in the source of life and hope I get exhausted - it’s too big for me to keep in order.

An analogy struck me as I listened this week. In jazz and hip hop and almost every genre of music we hear riffs of old familiar songs appear again and again. But they appear in new songs surrounded by old rhythms, or old texts brought into new context, surrounding or life. The change is not to insult the old riff it in fact is an honoring of it and in a new way and enhancing of, a making new, a bringing it out in a new form for more people to listen to and to be blessed by. Perhaps that is how we are called to be in our faith. Just as Jesus did we are called to create something new out of the glorious old.

When we read the text we might ask what have we heard and how can we carry it out in a new way? I have now heard in three different contexts in the last three weeks a somewhat similar suggestion and although I have used it for myself overtime I think it might be time to suggest it to you brilliant people. The suggestion is to hear the context of your faith in a new way. What if we heard the scriptures or even read them ourselves and then took them into our day, into the places that we go, into the world in which we live?

Now I know some of you are saying oh I already do that. But I mean intentionally. As preachers you may not know this but we are often encouraged not to always write in our office (and as much as people then wonder where we are and if we are working we are told to let go of that). See Jesus didn’t sit in his office so that he might come up with a great new parable. He spoke to the context of the people because he witnessed their needs and concerns. Paul wrote to the context of the people from the texts of the people.

He discovered that as we are reformed into followers of the way God is calling us to something new. To be in Christ we are to be with one another. Corporate in nature. Unified in diversity is at the very heart of the gospel. Jesus’ mission statement for himself and for us is to bring the good news to everyone in their context and their time and in a way that will

Speak life to them. That is what epiphany is about - shining light in a way that people will discover life.

Lois Wilson former moderator would say “we in this room all have one thing in common and that is we are here because of Jesus.” Peter Short would agree and he would add “There are many streams that flow out from that common source of Jesus. **We don’t explain Him, He explains us!** Of course we are different.” And I have asked before why would this God who created 350,000 species of beetle be satisfied with just one homogenous body of worshippers?”

The Jesus tradition is marked by the fact that it is always alive. It’s hard to kill. That’s why we know He will come again (he has come again - in the lives we live and interpret). And so as we discover who we are in this place we are called to interpret our faith and scriptures not for a cookie cutter boxed in religion we are called to distinguish living tradition from mere habit.

Paul in 1 Cor.11 says “Our main job is always to be passing on the living tradition but within habits that do not get in the way.” What is the spirit speaking to us in this place? Part of the goal of last week was to begin to discover what is beloved habit and what is living tradition. The purpose we all share is to hand over living tradition.” Our faith and our tradition is to bring to transform us from weeping to joy, it is to bring us to a place of ‘aha’ or epiphany. It is to open us up in a moment of recognition of self that we might say “Yes I knew that!”

Ezra and Jesus and Paul read the scriptures and all the people interpret so that they rediscover all that they already have in such a way that it lives again for them. What is the epiphany you will have in your life today? What is the story of this faith for your life? What does the scripture say to us as Squamish United Church? Where is the moment when you say I Believe and really mean it?