

3rd Epiphany – 24Jan16

Luke4:13-21; Psalm19; 1Corinthians12:12-31a;
Nehemiah8

As Pastor Sonja and I are beginning this week, it's only fair game for the fodder of jokes about recycling previous sermons. Though you've heard me touted as green and eco-conscious and a care-r of creation, I'm not a recycler in that particular way.

Without the reuse or recycle, I wondered if maybe I could emphasize the reduce side of things, as in reducing my workload. So I went searching on the internet. But I couldn't find any good sermons for newly arriving pastors, and instead came upon this for two new veterinarians:

Greetings, dear dogs and cats. It is a pleasure to be here with you. Both Dr. Sondra and I, Dr. Nate, appreciate your patience in these recent months of having to sit, wait, and stay while you've been eager for us to arrive. We're grateful for those interim professionals who were with you in the meantime, for David Claws-n-Barks, Jerry Paws, and Dan Beagle. As we begin serving among you, we look forward to the opportunity to care for you in times of sickness, to administer the proper inoculations against evil and dread diseases, to comfort you amid your fears, for office visits, and also to share snacks when you are good. Finally, we are held by the promise that all dogs do go to heaven.

So I could go on like that, but I'm going to stop for several reasons. First, such work of making up playful allegory does not serve to endear me to my wife Acacia. More importantly, it's prompting us to move toward a larger point. Almost always in sermons, we have to consider how we're hearing words and what we take them for. That gets highlighted in perhaps an opposite way when I told you those words of veterinarian greeting weren't originally for you,

not for your situation. By claiming that it was from an old vet clinic and not church here today I'd suspect it made you hear it differently, taking it with less weight.

Now, a sermon is much the exact reverse of that, since we should receive it with utmost importance. In our Lutheran understanding (since I'm so steeped in this identity, you'll have to bear with me as I come to understand how this works and who may or may not identify as Lutheran in these gatherings), in our Lutheran understanding a sermon is very special, among the chances to hear directly God's Word to you and for you.

This is a very different way to hear and apply words, amid our normal reality bombarded by constant communication and lying news updates, and also especially when so much of what we hear and apply together as church are very old words of the Bible and ancient liturgy. Let's take another couple examples to clarify this direction.

One place I like to turn is to the words of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. It was disappointing this past week that my books were all packed away and so I was out of my normal rhythm of getting to be steeped in MLK for his birthday observance. It's worth re-reading his words partly because he was so eloquent, such a fine preacher, and his words are still so moving.

That we're moved by what he had to say also indicates that his words still have relevance. Partly that's ongoing tensions and justice and rights that still demand to be worked out in our society. When he called for a "radical revolution of values" and to "shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society," we hear that also as a contemporary calling. We still now observe that "when machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people," we are approaching "spiritual death" from "the

giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism." We long for life, and may take those words as emphatic and inspirational, desiring to have our own lives transformed and for the church again to serve as a beacon, a headlight to guide society rather than a taillight bringing up the rear.

What gets fuzzier, however, is when we try to ascribe larger credit or source to Pastor King's words. Can we clearly say that God was speaking through him? And is God's Word still talking to us through this preacher who has been gone for almost five decades? What do we do when those old words are chauvinistic or simply old, more of a historical document than meeting our present realities? Where does God's voice go then?

Obviously there is no way to delineate that, no definitive way to attribute one voice or set of words as speaking for God while eliminating another. That ambiguity is, after all, what makes this faith: it cannot be proven.

To turn to another example, we read together the words from Psalm 19. The first half is seen as a Psalm of creation, that night and day, sun, moon, stars, and even new planets are declaring and telling the glory of God, that somehow God might be identified by the sky. Yet verse 3 contradicts that. It seems to say that the firmament proclaims God's handiwork, but we can't understand the message. Even though the voice goes out to all, it is an unheard voice, and whatever they have to report does not sound in our ears.

Though I don't always like it, I appreciate that distinction. We may be in awe of sunsets or aurora borealis or of deep-gazing telescopes, but we'd have to confess that these don't directly tell us about God. We may take them as validation for what we already believe, a God of beauty, of infinite handiwork throughout the cosmos. Converse perspectives don't shy away from labeling natural phenomena as signs from a

retributive God, exacting punishment. A poster outside one of our Sunday school classrooms downstairs asks what God looks like. It features a drawing of the sun, the answer "you," plus the polar sides of "everything and nothing." This discernment does get notoriously complex: is the pummeling blizzard on the east coast a message of divine displeasure? Is it a supersized dose of wintry wonderland gift to be enjoyed? Is it less a factor of communicating God's identity and more of the climate change we're causing? Or none of these? There may be knowledge being declared, but we have a tough time discerning the message, just as the Psalm said.

Similarly for that ambiguous message in the Psalm, let's notice the final verse, on "words of my mouth" and meditations being acceptable. That verse is frequently prayed by preachers as an opener to sermons, perhaps here, too. I don't use it. It may be that I'm a little too brash; I learned to begin with something shocking or provocative, or just to jump right in with the big stuff. But there's also something that leaves me uncomfortable with that pre-sermon prayer, as a bit too un-Lutheran. Again, we don't understand sermons to be take-or-leave meditations, not just one person's ideas about God, but words *from* God. Because this isn't intended as another among polyvalent spiritual suggestions, it's not just sentimental trivialities that can be shrugged off.

On the other hand, in sermons I have said and keep on saying plenty that's unacceptable, words that don't seem very godly for being so earthy or mundane. I can forget to say what needs to be said, or I'm ignorant, or I just plain miss the mark. We know that sermons have been used to hurt and exclude, to manipulate, to claim that I'm right and you're wrong, with the heavy hand of divine sanction behind it. There is the risk of sounding or even being authoritarian, though I hope and try that you

don't hear it from me. Yet it remains a difficulty, not only when we're gazing to the stars, but when we're listening for God's Word from a mortal, fallible, and occasionally absurd human mouth. I say that speaking from personal experience!

Yet these words are where we listen to have God's will conveyed to us, meaning both what God wants from you and also what God wants for you and is working for on your behalf. Even if we're not yet familiar with each other, still you have called me here in some major way in order to be a mouthpiece, to proclaim God's expectations from and blessings for you.

So after all that background about sermons, how they should function and why we have them, maybe it's time that I actually get around to doing it. For this, we have what I consider to be a prototypical and foundational epitome in our Gospel reading. Jesus has gathered with others in worship. He shares a Bible reading. And then, also giving his first sermon—one of the shortest of all time—he declares, "Today this has been fulfilled in your hearing."

If we're searching for God's designs and purposes, Jesus is a good place to look (and listen). He's the heart of why we're here. And he proclaims God is sharing good news. Today, that sermon of his might seem to have more oomph, then, than mine or whatever the skies and weather patterns are trying to say. When he proclaims that something is accomplished, we might have inherent readiness to trust that.

Yet in picking up old words from the prophet Isaiah, he says they are speaking not just to ancient circumstances but continue to be purposeful. And not only are those old words still significant, but within the sermon is when they are accomplished, when God is doing what God says God will do. So just what is God's Word saying to you today? Well, we might be best to repeat and reiterate from Jesus: from a Bible reading that speaks of good news to the

poor, release to captives, sight for the blind, freedom from oppression, and God's favor, again I declare this good news to you: this is fulfilled in your hearing.

Some of that truly is conveyed in the words themselves. You may know and trust in God's loving presence with you and blessing for you because these words are what they promise.

Others of that you may find fulfilled in your life or through your life. Together, we are good news people. Through this gathering in worship, we are formed into the body of Christ. You become God's hands and muscles and, yes, mouth. This work is for you and also through you, as God continues striving to love and serve our lives and this world in so much need. Rejoice: you are Jesus people, for the fulfillment of God's work. Amen