

Sermon: The Eyes of All Were Fixed On Him

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles P.C., January 23, 2022)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Do you believe that the words of God proclaimed in a sermon have the power to convict you from deep within, to move you to tears? Do you believe that the words of God proclaimed in a sermon have the potential to anger you, to enrage you to the point that you almost want to string up the preacher, the messenger of God, to shut him up or to silence her so you will no longer have to hear those words? I ask these questions because that is precisely what happened in our lectionary passages today.

The Old Testament reading today, in Nehemiah chapter 8 brings us to the city of Jerusalem, in front of the Water Gate, where the Book of the Law of Moses was read out loud to the people, by Ezra the priest and the scribe. The context of that passage took place during post-exile, when Nehemiah the governor had rebuilt the city of Jerusalem and its temple within. The Book of the Law of Moses, or more commonly referred to as the Torah, is the collection of the first five books of the Old Testament. Torah, though traditionally understood to be written by Moses, is nonetheless considered in Judaism to be equivalent to the words of God.

What we witness in the passage, is the public reading of those words by Ezra, accompanying by interpretations of the reading from a number of Levites. The scene described in the Scripture is incredible. Ezra was raised up on a wooden platform, standing above the people. As the holy words were read, people both men and women prostrated themselves in a gesture of worship. Levites, all named specifically, with six on Ezra's right, seven on his left, and thirteen others strategically fanned out and located amongst the people were expounding on the meaning of those words.

I have a hard time imagine the logistics of it all, how it all worked with one reader and twenty-six interpreters, preachers really, all proclaiming the words of God, simultaneously. This went on, as the Scripture noted, from early in the morning to midday—so for 4 to 5 hours straight. Were people falling asleep due to fatigue? Not at all! They were so convicted in their hearts that they were all moved to tears, as if this was the first time that

they had heard the words of God being proclaimed, as if their lives, their future well-beings depend on the hearing of those words.

In some way, I sympathize with the people of Israel. The entire seventy-year of exile was brought on by the disobedience, the idolatry of Judah. The punishment that God had brought on the people was severe, though limited in time. Through the proclamations of successive prophets, through the likes of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, God had promised to bring the people back, once exiled, not because of their repentance, ever so shifty and flimsy, but because that God cannot stand that God's holy name be profaned.

When the people of God were finally reacquainted with the words of God again, it was as if they finally understood how precious those words were, as if a priceless treasure that was once lost now found. So as the people of God were so moved to tears, Ezra and the Levites instructed the people not to lament, saying *"This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep. Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."* (Nehemiah 8:9-10)

The other lectionary reading today, specifically the Gospel of Luke, chapter 4, takes us to one of the earlier sermons that Jesus preached. It happened during his return trip to Nazareth, his hometown where he grew up. Evidently Jesus had already garnered some fame, through miracles and healings performed in nearby regions. But instead being embraced as a local hero returning home, the treatment that Jesus received was anything but warm.

The Scripture describes Jesus going to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He was given a scroll to read, from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, a compilation of Isaiah 61:1-2, with an added line from Isaiah 58:6, *"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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

Jesus then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. It was customary that readers should stand while reading, and would then sit to explain. This is where the author of Luke kind of amps up the wattage, cranks up the temperature by recording, 'the eyes of all in the

synagogue were fixed on him', as if expecting Jesus to make a dramatic proclamation. Jesus did not disappoint, he sat down and preached this one line sermon in verse 21, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

With that one line, Jesus shifts the long beheld messianic expectation raised by the prophet Isaiah, all onto himself—the Spirit of the Lord is upon **'me'**, because God has anointed **'me'**, and God has sent **'me'**. With that one line, the entire weight of the eventual deliverance of Israel, and perhaps the salvation of all humankind, is now squarely upon the shoulder of Jesus, the local boy who grew up in a carpenter's family.

"Isn't this Joseph's son?", they asked sceptically. How then is he going to bring good news to the poor, to release the captives, to recover sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free? Ha! He can't even hold down a steady job! He can't even find a nice local girl, and settle down to raise a proper Jewish family. How is he then going to proclaim, to usher in the year of the Lord's favor, the year of Jubilee? Ludicrous! Preposterous! Has he gone mad?

The lectionary reading does not include the section that follows, the exchange between Jesus and the town folks. I won't go into too much detail, but to simply to say Jesus seemed to go out of his way to provoke his former neighbours, some undoubtedly his kins, in a kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy of 'prophets have no honour in their own town'.

But I will say this, it really wasn't until when Jesus explained in a convoluted way that salvation is now available to the Gentiles, to the exclusion of Israelites, that his town folks sort of lost it. They became so enraged, seeing him as a false prophet that they must put down, right there and then. So they attempted to hurl Jesus down a steep hill. But, as the Gospel writer describes, Jesus passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

So let us come back to the questions I posed earlier: Do you believe that the words of God proclaimed in a sermon have the power to convict you from deep within, to move you to tears? Do you believe that the words of God proclaimed in a sermon have the potential to anger you, to enrage you to the point that you almost want to string up the preacher, the messenger of God, to shut him up or to silence her so you will no longer have to hear those words? I hope you do, for your sake and certainly not for mine.

Now don't get me wrong, I do not ever want to enrage my hearers from the pulpit, to the point that they would seek out justifiable murder. But I do want all of you to know that words proclaimed from the pulpit, have the same weight, and the same efficacy as the words of God that is alive and active. "*Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*" (Hebrews 4:12) Words of God, both written and proclaimed have the power and potential to move ones to tears, into repentance, to that complete change of hearts, and to that eventual transformation. And that applies to both hearers and speakers. We do not read or hear the words of God, the words of God read us!

I was recently reminded of one of the first sermons that I had ever preached, by a former classmate of mine, now a colleague and fellow minister serving another congregation here in Ottawa. She reminded me that I had called Knox College, my alma mater, a tomb, a sarcophagus. I sort of remember it, but not clearly, at least not in its full context. Regrettably I no longer have the full text. From what I could recall, that sermon was delivered during a Wednesday chapel hour, to a room full of seminarians, both students and professors. It was based on the exegesis of the passage of John 12:24, which reads, "*Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*"

The thrust of that sermon was to encourage fellow students to look at seminary studies, particular our collective experience at the Knox College, as a place where death of our old-selves occur, just as grains of wheat that must die in order to grow and bear much fruits. Evidently, I must have really given it to the college, perhaps painting that experience of death a bit too vividly, it left a strong and lasting impression on that fellow classmate. We shared about it only recently, light heartedly, but acknowledging those words that came out of my mouth some sixteen years ago, had somehow patterned both of our respective lives, our call to ministry—of dying, resurrecting, and bearing fruits.

So, do I believe that the words of God proclaimed in a sermon have the power and the potential to change lives, to transform ordinary individuals to be much more than they ever imagine could be possible? By the grace of God, I do. And I hope for your sake that you do also, so the joy of the Lord may be your strength.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.