

“The Empowering Word”

By Steven Chambers

January 24, 2009
3rd Sunday after Epiphany
Nehemiah 8:1-3; 5-6, 8-10
Luke 4: 14-21

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Kingston, Ontario

Words, words, words. The power of words. Words of power, of subtlety, of anger, of candor, of love, of hope. Words can do a lot of things; a lot of good and a lot of harm. As one who spends a considerable amount of time with words, as perhaps others of you do as well, I am fascinated by the power of words, the shape of words put together and the resulting interaction of speaking and hearing. It is a weighty responsibility to take words, put them together in some shape and speak them in front of a group of people like this: what does it mean to preach in a world of blogs, internet discussion and other forms of chat, chat, chat? Words, words, words. Preaching is more than the assembly of words; it is also the engagement with certain texts.

We are descendents of those who have been called throughout history, the ‘people of the Word’ or sometimes, the ‘people of the Book.’ The label, as unhelpful as all labels, describes us by the book that is the scripture for us: the Bible. Now in each and every congregation, there comes a time when it must be asked: “what is the role of the Bible for us?” There will be varying perspectives on that here, but this morning I want to consider how scripture engages us – even when the realities and the circumstances in some parts of the world are full of death and destruction. As we gather around the Bible this morning, how does it address us?

Our first reading today sets the scene for the ritual that is still ours: the word of God is read in the midst of the people, calling them to faithfulness. After many years in exile, the people of Israel gathered to listen to the priest Ezra read from the law. As we look in on this moment, from the perspective of so many centuries later, through all that happens to story-telling down through those years, we can still catch some of the drama and emotion of the moment. Ezra mounted the high wooden pulpit, opened the book in front of all the people, and as he began to read from it, the people stood up. Do you sense the drama, the movement, the anticipation? The longing to hear something. These are people of exile who haven’t experienced this ritual reading for many, many years. What a moment this must have been! Ezra reads, starting early in the morning and continuing to the middle of the day. Then he, and others, interpret what has been read; the people are helped to understand. It is a moment of great power. Caught up in the experience, the people begin to weep. We don’t know why. Some speculate that the people have some experience of guilt over some behaviours of the past, or they are sensing some distance between what God is promising and what they are currently experiencing: it just can’t ever come true. It will never be like the promises of God. Whatever the reason, the people wept at the hearing, only to be told by Nehemiah, the governor, and Ezra, that this day is holy, a day for celebration and not for mourning. It is a holy day; a feast, a day of celebration because the law, the word of God, has

reverberated once more in the midst of the community. The people are liberated and empowered as they hear and incorporating the Word in their lives.

And then our second reading: another proclamation of holy text in another place and time, but still in the midst of a gathered group of people seeking to be faithful. Jesus is described returning to the town where he grew up, Nazareth. In the synagogue on the Sabbath, he is asked to read. The reading is an old one from Isaiah, familiar to the people:

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 favour."

Luke 4: 18-19

What happens in the next moment is like the magical epiphany years before when the people heard Ezra read. There is a tingling anticipatory moment of silence, all eyes are fixed on the speaker, like 30 million television viewers waiting for the next word on the latest dazzling insight in the culture, and Jesus speaks.

"Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."
Some of you here know what happens next, many of you I suspect. But don't go there. Don't let your mind go to that. We'll deal with that in weeks to come. Just think of this moment. The word, the preaching, a provocative declaration of a whole new realm: a compassionate caring for the poor, release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. And then the clincher: it is here. It is now. It is fulfilled. Today. In your hearing.

We can see from our distant perspective, what those close to Jesus could not see. We can see the interpretation of scripture mirroring itself – reflecting back and forth – the Double Mirror as Northrop Frye called it¹ – so that as Jesus reads the scroll of Isaiah, the prophetic words of an earlier era are lifted forward in time, reflected if you will in the mirror of the holy texts, concentrated on him by the gospel writer: the Spirit is on Jesus, according to Luke. This is Luke's announcement of Jesus' message, reflecting backward and forward all at the same time. He is the one anointed to preach 'the good news'. And it is immediate, urgent. His words, he the Word, empowers scripture and our experience of it.

One of the things we need to remember about scripture, holy words, read in the midst of community is that they are words with power. Not in and of themselves, but because of where they have traveled and with whom they have kept company. Their power, as Luke seemed to be saying, is of the Spirit of God (remember how he described Jesus coming out of the wilderness, "filled with the power of the spirit"). Scripture is God's story and God is the central character. The Spirit of God is upon us when we remember that, when we ask ourselves the question, what is God saying to us – today – in these holy words? Once we have asked that kind of question and listened

¹ Northrop Frye, *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion* (The United Church Publishing House, 1991).

deeply, then it seems appropriate to ask, what next? What are we to do? What are we to do?

The power of scriptural words can be a blessing, full of liberation and creativity. But their power can also be destructive and harmful. Scripture can be harmful in ways that it is used to condemn people, to alienate and isolate them, to harm them instead of offering love and hope. You will have examples you can think of. I was shocked this week to read about a manufacturer of weapons for the United States military that routinely engraves scripture verse references on its wares currently being used in Iraq and Afghanistan.² That is the power of scripture used in a demonic fashion in my view.

In John Updike's novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, Clarence Wilmot, a minister in the early years of the twentieth century, is introduced just as his faith in God is leaving him – at least his faith in the God that he had been taught in seminary.³ That was the God who was rationalistic, all powerful, dominating and controlling. That was the God who could not bend; who could not engage the vicissitudes and realities of human life. Similar to that doctrinal understanding, Rev. Clarence Wilmot had been taught and formed into ministry, never to bend, nor waiver, nor doubt. Just to trust in this bulwark God. But, then it hit him, in the midst of the poverty of his New Jersey community; this God made no sense at all. Wilmot could not understand how the God of ancient Israel – so ingrained in him as a bully, a tyrant and controller of all the world, could fit with his emerging experience of life's realities: the brokenness and the poverty. His faith was destroyed when the struggles of people in his community overwhelmed his doctrinal hard lines. His ministerial supervisor tried to put him back together, but failed. Wilmot resigned from his religious calling and went on to a life peddling encyclopedias to people who couldn't afford them but bought them anyway. Sadly, many of these purchasers needed a different word of hope than that contained in an expensive box of books. Updike cleverly mirrors the minister's faith-empty peddling of scripture with his second career selling books full of words, facts and figures.

Words, words, words. We do not find faith in the words of the Bible, we find the blessing of relationship, we find hope and a commitment to the future; we find a God who is far from rigid but is alive and interested in human life. A God who is continually seeking us and inviting our participation in the new life of the world.

It is the power of God in the Word that moved the exiles to tears; remembering that they were God's chosen ones; that God had not forgotten them. Cause for celebration. It is God's initiative, God's coming to us in ways we do not expect – that is the good news for today.

It is also true in scripture that people challenged God, rebelled against God and were angry at God. In Jesus' reading of ancient scripture, he found – he himself was - good news even for those for whom good news was the furthest thing from their reality. Somehow, most often beyond our understanding, it is possible for good news to be with those who suffer. A writer on the *Christian Century* website helped me to reflect on this in light of the Haitian tragedy. Richard Kauffman wrote:

² *The Globe and Mail*, 20 January 2010.

³ John Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies* (Fawcett Columbine, 1996).

I do find some comfort in the idea that we have a God who suffers with us when we suffer. But a God who only feels our pain comes up short. Sometimes it would be nice to have a God who takes away our suffering or, better still, doesn't let it happen in the first place.

I don't think it's impious to call God to account for events like the Haitian earthquake. I imagine the psalmists or the prophets demanding to know: why, God? Why now? Why to these people, for whom daily life was already a great hardship?

We have a God who does more than suffer with us, a God who brings redemption out of the pits of human suffering and deprivation.⁴

That is ultimately true of our experience of the God of scripture – God does more than suffer alongside people, God can redeem people, transforming despair and bringing hope. It is true, too, of the Word that became flesh in Jesus – new life comes out of what appears to have been death. It is to our us now that God in Jesus Christ, through a powerful word of scripture, may be calling.

Think of the moments with scripture when you have been looking for something, longing for something and instead it has been given. You have been found. We can seek and seek and seek throughout the scriptures – and such is not a preoccupation lacking in worth or meaning – but it rarely leads to the power that is from God. It is only when our seeking through the scriptures engages our living in the world, our seeking of relationships, our hopes, our insights, our visions and our actions – that we know their meaning for today. It is only when the words of the printed page, the canon of scriptures, come alive in our hearts through the Spirit that we are ready to act. Only when the same Spirit that inspired those who wrote the words of those ancient scrolls, that inspired the One who picked up the scroll of Isaiah that day and read it, who claimed its fulfillment in that day – only when that same Spirit engages our hearts with the word does God engage us and ready us to take on the challenges of the world. We don't really choose the moment or the way; it chooses us. It calls to us beyond doctrinal rigidity to a living faith that engages the circumstances of the world.

Once struck by the powerful, what's next? Each of us is to decide. As the world's excruciating needs flash before us on the television screen night after night – the voice of scripture resonates: there is – somewhere, somehow – good news for the poor, the captives, the dying, the orphaned. He we are, O God of love – empower us to care for the world. AMEN

⁴ January 19, 2010 Theolog: the Blog of *The Christian Century*.
“Letting God off the Hook”
by Richard A. Kauffman