

GRACE CHURCH
EPIPHANY 3-C (RCL)

Honesdale, PA
23-24 January 2010

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a
Luke 4: 14-21

“BIND US, and FREE US”

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Allow me to bore you with a little background in ancient Jewish history
as we begin to unravel today’s readings for an understanding.
It is to me an important Bible Study
through the period between the Babylonian captivity of the Jews
and the birth of Jesus,
For I truly believe that we really cannot fully comprehend
what Jesus says and does
unless we understand his context.
Otherwise we fall into the trap, as I suggested last week
(to the handful of folk who ventured out in the storm)
that Jesus becomes the fluffy, cuddly, savior buddy
of popular spirituality.
Jesus has a deep rooting in his ancient Jewish history
and his approach to the needs of his community
against the oppressive authorities against his people.

Jesus is now in his late 20s,
and is invited to preach in the synagogue as a young rabbi.
But let’s explore how he got here from the cow stall in Bethlehem.
We missed the side-note in Matthew’s telling of Joseph squirreling away
Mary and the infant Jesus to Egypt for safety until King Herod died.
The Holy Family returns to the small city of Nazareth
where the young Jesus grew up in this little town
5 km south of a Greco-Roman capital of the territory of Galilee,
along a major trade-route, between Jerusalem and Sepphoris,
Caesarea Philippi and Damascus.
Yet Nazareth was still a small community of between 400-500 residents.
Imagine Waymart on Route 6.
In this outpost, a carpenter made his trade with Mary his wife,
Jesus and his brothers and sisters.
In the village synagogue with the local rabbi,
Jesus would have studied Torah - the five Books, the Penta-teuch -
memorizing the Law of Moses, as every elementary boy would.
Then as he proved himself, the rabbi, that is, the teacher,
would have progressed Jesus and a few others to study Mishnah,
sort of in Preparatory School.
Somewhere between these two points we find this precocious 12-year old.

In traditional Jewish family observance that year between 8-12 AD,
Joseph and Mary packed up the kids
and joined their extended family for the annual trek
to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival
becoming a family tradition that Jesus follows in his last week.
Then, as the family heads home following the celebrations,
they discover that Jesus snuck out and stayed back in the Temple.
This 12-year old whipper-snap,
has advanced from studying Torah through Mishnah
(which is sort of studying the foot-notes at the bottom of the page)
and now Jesus has himself gaining the theological degree - -
as the best of the best students.

I mentioned not long ago, that our Jewish Christian Dialogue at GTS
had a retired Jewish secretary to whom I asked once,
"Ruth, I don't understand, what is it that Jews believe?"
She laughed, "Ed, you don't understand!
We don't believe; we argue!"

So here is Jesus, in the Temple following that tradition -
arguing with the Rabbis and he gains their favor and astonishment,
a sort of diploma in its own right,
though Mary probably boxed him on his ears when she found him!
We lose Jesus from that 12-year old student of Mishnah's footnotes,
until we find him in the Jordan River with cousin John,
his subsequent trial in the Wilderness,
and is today invited by his former teacher, the rabbi of Nazareth
to come as the Son of the Parish
and expound on the Torah's reading
at this local Sabbath gathering in his home parish.

I remember what it was like the day after my ordination to the diaconate,
going to our home parish and preaching to our spiritual family!
The Gospel reading that Sunday was Jesus looking upon the people
as a flock without a shepherd.

For our parish home was indeed looking for a new priest.

And I knew, as much as I might want to, I couldn't be that shepherd.

"One can never go home," came to mind.

I wonder if that is what Jesus felt as he sat down to preach on Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, [because I was just ordained yesterday], and he has
chosen me to bring good news to the poor.

Maybe not at this time, not in this place.

But let's go back a few centuries before Jesus' time:
to Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the prophet,
whose words we hear today.

They Jewish people had returned to the destroyed country of Israel
after the Assyrian destruction and the Babylonian Captivity.

The Sacred Temple of Jerusalem, built by King Solomon,
was destroyed as was all of Jerusalem
and the sacrifices of the Temple required by the Law were ended.
What replaced the sacramental offerings of the people was the study,
interpretation and observance of the Law -
the strict observance we find in Jesus' time.
The establishment of the rabbinic and Pharisaic traditions of the synagogue
so that the people will become once again and remain holy to God.
Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the prophet
were called out by a gathering of the people,
petitioned to read to them the book we call Deuteronomy,
with a call to return to purity for the people of God.
This 'Second Law' differed from the former having a stronger focus
on changing social conditions, the protection of the weak,
and God's rights over his country and people.

Introduction in *New Jerusalem Bible*

You can hear the echoes of Jesus' proclamation of redemption today
reading from Isaiah's prophecy:
"I have come to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to
set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his
people."

The people are restored in the land,
then the Greeks come and subjugate the people again,
and the Romans take over the Empire.
And in the two centuries before Jesus is born
a revolt is raged under the Maccabeans - Simon and Judas the priest,
culminating in the famous self-sacrifice at Masada.
Into this whole context of religion, theology, politics and oppression
Jesus is born.
As Golde in the Fiddler on the Roof asks her husband Tevye,
"Wouldn't this be a good time for Messiah?"
Indeed it was and it still is.

Back to Jesus today,
"As was his custom," he went to the little synagogue in Nazareth -
no bigger than our own Temple Beth Israel a few blocks away.
A few years ago, I was at Temple Beth Israel for a Bat Mitzvah.
Rabbi Allen Smith lifted the scroll of Torah out of the Ark of the Covenant
and instead of placing it on the *bimah* and unrolling it to be read,
he had the congregation stand and unfolded the scroll
passing it around the gathered people in celebration.
The Word of God binded us all together in that celebration.
It is an image that will never leave me -
that Rabbi Allen showed us - forgive me the crassness - the Duct-tape of Holy Scripture.

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The World of God binds us all together,
 holding us tightly in the fulfillment of the Word in the Word -
 the Word made flesh - in you and me - all of us together.
We are the Word of God alive and in the world today.
Just as Jesus tells us of himself.
We are the living, growing, moving Word of God for the world today.

We read and hear and study and struggle and argue and discuss -
 the joy of the Jewish tradition,
 and the joy of the Anglican heritage.
We don't have the answers, but we invite the questions
 and will struggle with you in the answers.
That is the heritage of understanding and sharing that we have together.
The scroll of life encircled around us
 as children, men and women, youth and aged share our story
 God's story, and learn and grow,
 feel ourselves transformed
 and society healed and renewed.

To begin with, though, like Jesus,
 we read and memorize Holy Scripture - Oh, Horror!
 then we study the footnotes - Mishnah
 and argue Talmud - interpretations
 and finally produce our own systematic theology.
After all, if Jesus can go to theological grad school, why can't we?
"To read, mark, and inwardly digest God's Word,"
 as our ancient Anglican Prayer invites each of us.

Now, if you'd like to explore more about the history of Israel,
 the Inter-Testamental period,
 and the political scene of Jesus' teaching,
I'd be glad to offer some time - maybe on a Saturday potluck supper.
I know - it's a cheap advertisement.
But come anyway.
You may be fed - physically, theologically and even spiritually.

CHILDREN'S SERMON

To Bind and to Loose

a roll of duct tape and a can of WD-40

We Do-It-Yourselfers have a saying,
 “‘There aint nothin you can’t do without Duct-Tape and WD-40!”
One binds things together that are falling apart,
 and the other loosens things that stick together.

But you know what, we don’t need Duct-Tape or WD-40.
We have Jesus.

Jesus has come to bind us together
 when things seem to be falling apart,
and loosens things that we are stuck to.

Let’s pray:
Jesus, you promise to bind things together in your love, when things around us seem to be falling apart.
And you also promise to loose us from the things we that hold us captive. Help us to call upon you
when we need your help.
AMEN.