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

Luke 4:14-21

## IT'S ABOUT TIME: TODAY

I am one who has always enjoyed reading the morning newspaper. At our house, we have a new delivery person for The Inquirer, so I am happy that it comes about an hour earlier than it did previously. But in an age of online news, we are fully aware that each print newspaper is full of yesterday's news, and if the Phillies are playing on the west coast or go into extra innings here, the paper won't even have yesterday's score.

The story that comes to us through the Bible is often called the gospel or the good news. I was searching for the most iconic newspaper headlines from the last one hundred years as I was thinking about how news is conveyed. Of course, some of those headlines told bad news and some shared good news. Sometimes the news was good for some and bad for others. On November 11 of this year will be the one hundredth anniversary of the end of the First World War. On August 19, 1920 there was the headline about the ratification for women's suffrage or right to vote being completed – hard to believe that has been less than one hundred years ago. The attacks on Pearl Harbor and on the Twin Towers and Pentagon in 1941 and 2001 were major bad news headlines. So too the assassination headlines about JFK and MLK in 1963 and 1968. The end of the Second World War proclaimed on August 15, 1945 brought huge headlines. The Supreme Court banning school desegregation by unanimous vote was an important headline on May 18, 1954 even though our schools are still not in fact fully desegregated. I remember the July 21, 1969 headlines about the first humans who walked on the moon. I also remember the headlines and pictures of when the Berlin wall fell, shared on November 10, 1989. <sup>1</sup> What would be on your list for significant headlines during your lifetime?

Theologian Karl Barth spoke about people of faith having the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. <sup>2</sup> He would do so to communicate the understanding that

the good news found in scripture is not just news from many yesterdays ago, for it really isn't good news if it is not relevant to the context of today.

Our reading from Nehemiah comes just after the Hebrew people have gone through the time when Babylonian troops destroyed Jerusalem, including the first temple. The Jewish leaders then were forced into exile in Babylon for fifty years. Finally, the people who had been in exile were released and they came back to begin to rebuild Jerusalem. But to a great extent, the Hebrew scriptures had been lost or neglected during the time of the exile. So we hear in this part of Nehemiah of the re-introduction of the story of God's activity in the lives of their forebears, which came as good and relevant news to the people who needed guidance and a sense of identity. Twice in the passage the people are told by Ezra, the priest who was sharing the scripture readings with them, "This day is holy to the Lord your God." In order that the people would clearly understand that the news that was coming from God through scripture was good, he concluded his remarks saying, "The joy of the Lord is your strength."

We hear Jesus sharing an ancient text as well in our reading from Luke. At worship in the synagogue in which he grew up, he is invited to read scripture and comment on it. He reads a passage from Isaiah about someone being anointed by God's Spirit to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to forge freedom for the oppressed, and to proclaim the prevalence of God's blessings. He then says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The good news of scripture is not really good news if it is stuck in a different era and culture and lacks relevance for our situation today. It is not really good news if what it says about God and humanity is not true. It lacks real good-news status if it doesn't have the capacity to inspire and transform in ways that are needed. Is it good news for all people or just for some? Is the news temporary or long-lasting, even eternal in nature? Does the good news allow us to participate in making it?

There is a story of a couple who were touring an old colonial house in New England. It was occupied by a frail old woman, the last surviving descendant of the

original owner. As they stood in the main room talking, the visitors took note of a musket more than a couple of centuries old hanging over the fireplace. They were struck by its well-kept appearance and they hoped to take it down to examine it more closely. But the older woman quickly replied, "Please don't touch it. It's loaded and might go off." In response to some surprised looks, she went on to say, "My great, great, great grandfather loaded that gun and put it there against the day when he might strike a blow for the freedom of the American colonies."

"So he died before the Revolution?" the visitors asked.

"No," the hostess responded, "he lived to a ripe old age and died in 1817. He just never seemed able to generate much enthusiasm for General Washington's rebellion."

We can probably imagine what the man who put that musket there must have felt. He may have spent many days dreaming when he would strike a blow for freedom. Over time, more and more details must have filled in the outlines of the dream, until at last it turned into a full-length version of what was to come and included a touching scene in which a well-drilled militia would march up to the front door led by the cadence of fife and drum, and say, "Benjamin, lead us to victory on the field of honor."

There must have been tears in his eyes as Benjamin anticipated such a moment and composed a speech with which to respond to the invitation, one which doubtless drew heavily upon the classics. But then one April day a group of his less affluent neighbors came by and one of them yelled, "Ben, there's been quite a scrap at Concord. Git yer gun and let's go!"

This wasn't what Ben had imagined. He could see no connection between his concept of revolution and a grubby gang of ruffians setting out for a scuffle somewhere in Massachusetts. He preferred to wait for the day when history would be fulfilled in more appropriate terms. <sup>3</sup>

Upon the people hearing scripture offer them guidance and identity, Ezra said, “This day is holy to the Lord our God.” When he read words of God’s deliverance that became God’s call to participate, Jesus said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Let’s not leave just sitting there unused on the mantle or bookshelf an instrument of liberation for ourselves and others. I don’t know in what form you receive your daily news, but God still speaks to us through the good news found in scripture, changing every today into a new day of amazing possibilities. The headlines of good news we live out today are just waiting to be written. The joy of the Lord is (present tense) our strength.

<sup>1</sup> I used a variety of websites to gather this information.

<sup>2</sup> Wide attributed saying to Swiss theologian Karl Barth. I’ve not found it in any of his writings, but he evidently used it often when he spoke to groups.

<sup>3</sup> From a story by William Muehl in All the Damned Angels, Pilgrim Press, Philadelphia, 1972, pp. 52-53.