

Third Sunday after the Epiphany—Year C
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Psalm 19
I Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

Such an interesting mix of scriptures today! We're in **the square before the Water Gate in Nehemiah**, listening to **the priest Ezra read from the book of the law of Moses**; we're *meditating* on **the beauty of the law** and **the power of the statutes** and **the clarity gained from the commandments** in the **psalm**; we're exploring that never-ending tension of **the individual** and **the collective** with **Paul**; and we are captivated by **Jesus'** very first, and unbelievably short, **sermon in Luke**. What a feast for us to savor!

What strikes me is how all of these **narratives** weave together and illuminate each other, each one adding another layer of **complexity**.

And all this landing in a week where **narratives** are battling each other left and right, *literally*. And **narratives, the stories we tell**, are **powerful** because **at the heart of our stories lie our values**, spoken and unspoken, conscious and unconscious. And the **stories we tell** often *prescribe* the **actions we take**. So, exploring these **narratives**, unpacking them, examining them, challenging them—this is no small thing.

For instance, just think about **this week in Washington**. The **President** had a narrative, the **Speaker of the House** had a narrative, the **Republicans** and **Democrats** each had a **narrative**.

And *elements within each of those parties* had a **narrative**—the **Freedom Caucus** told a **different story** than **Establishment Republicans**, and **the young, upstart, activists** were not shy about **challenging** the **narrative of the old guard Democratic elders**.

My purpose here is *not to resolve which narrative is right* or *which narrative is wrong*, but to get us to **think about narratives, period**. As you listen to the news, *try to pull apart all the stories being told*, and **try to understand the values at the heart of those stories**.

Then, we had **an explosion on the National Mall** last week. The **confluence of three different groups**, all there to **exercise their right to free expression**—**Black Hebrew Israelites**, **male students from Covington Catholic High School** there for the **March for Life**, and **Native peoples** there for the **Indigenous People's March**.

The *first video* to hit **social media** was brief—*about 20 seconds*—and a **narrative took off like wildfire** about **young white men getting up in the face of a Native elder**. *Condemnations were fast and fierce. Death threats flying in the days that followed.*

But longer videos revealed a **more complex story** of what unfolded on the Mall. And **EVERYONE** brought to this encounter **their own stories** *formed over time* about **who “the other” is**, how **“the other” is a threat**, and **“who am I” in relation to that “other.”**

Again, I'm **not trying to resolve who was *right* and who was *wrong***, but to get us to **think seriously about the stories being told, the stories we perceive, the stories we pass on, and how *incomplete* and *limited* they are when edited for social media, and how dangerous they are when they *go viral***. And that **video that went viral on twitter**, it's come out that it was a **fake twitter account** that made it go. There are forces that **seek to sow division amongst us**—that's **diabolical**; that's a **power** that is ***seeking to throw us apart***.

EVERYTHING is **subject to *interpretation***, and this is *always* so, *even* when it comes to our **faith**. So, as **people of faith**, we **need to be as clear as we can be about the narratives we are living by and the values at the heart of these narratives**.

In **Nehemiah**, at the heart of their narrative was a **people who had been in exile and had so lost their way**. They *craved guidance, a path, some markers to guide them* as they *rebuilt their lives*. And into that moment of longing there is the **rediscovery of the book of the law of Moses holding within in it statutes and commandments** that could **guide them in how to live in relationship with God and one another**. No wonder they wept as Ezra read!

And the text tells us, **“So they read from the book, from the law of God, *with interpretation*. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”** These people come out of exile had a *touchstone*, the *recovery of a way of life* that had guided their ancestors through the wilderness before, a *path* that could *once again* order their life in a holy way.

The narrative the psalmist reveals is one where **the law and statutes and commandments are seen, *not as constraint and limitation***, but as **the very mechanism by which we find our deepest freedom**. That's a really different way of understand law. So often, we see **law as *hindering our freedom, not as serving it***. Something to ponder.

You can hear echoes of the **narratives** that **Paul** is trying to address in his **first letter to the Corinthians**—**narratives about inclusion and exclusion, narratives about my individual rights and preferences, narratives about “who I am” apart from “you.”** And all of these **narratives** play out in an **elevation of the individual quite disconnected from the community**.

Paul is crystal clear that is *not* how **the body of Christ** functions. **Yes**, we are **individuals**, but we have been **woven into Christ's body where all are welcome—Jew and Greek, slave and free**. **Yes**, the **individual has gifts**, but, as **Paul** tells us earlier in **chapter 12**, those **gifts** are **given and called forth by the Holy Spirit in service to the *common good***.

And *today*, he gets really graphic, talking about **the unique gifts of each part of the body**, and how **the body just doesn't work *without* the other unique parts** doing their *eye thing*, or *ear thing*, or *nose thing*, or *hand or foot thing*. **No one part of the body can say to another, “I have no need of you.”**

And then, **Paul** goes even further—**those members of the body we think of as *weaker, less honorable, less respectable*, they are *indispensable*, clothed with *greater honor*, treated with *greater respect***.

And that final **manifesto** at the end of that passage, “**But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the *same care* for one another. If *one* member suffers, *all* suffer together with it; if *one* member is honored, *all* rejoice together with it. Now *you* are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”**

So, a narrative emerges that we are members of the body of Christ *and we belong to one another, giving the *same care* to one another, whether weak *or* strong; when *one* suffers, we *all* do; when *one* is honored, we *all* rejoice.* The **individual matters**, but *never apart from one’s connection to “the other.”* That is a very **different story** from “**the other**” that is **to be feared**, and Paul’s *story* will lead us to very **different actions**.

Then there is this **whole story** that unfolds in **Luke**. First, we have to mark that **Jesus has just emerged from wrestling the three temptations** in his **wilderness wanderings**—Jesus has *rejected* the faces of the **False Self** that would tell us that it’s all about **power and control OR safety and survival and security OR esteem and affection**. **Jesus knows who he is** as God’s **Beloved**, and that **he is enough just as he is**. Only after **grounding himself in his core identity** as a **Beloved Son**, does he **walk into his hometown synagogue on the sabbath**, as was his **custom**. And the **scroll of the prophet Isaiah is handed to him**.

Were the **iPhones to start their video right now**, we might start to **construct a narrative that Jesus is a traditionalist**, and *that* would start us down a certain path.

But wait, **Jesus unrolls the scroll, and he finds the place where it is written**: “**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.**” And [then] he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “**Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.**”

Whoa. Mindblowing. **Jesus just took a central text from the great prophet Isaiah, and claimed that narrative, that story, for here, right now.** He claimed *that text as his manifesto*, as that which would **highlight his core values, would dictate his actions, set forth his mission** that would **guide him** the rest of his days. A *belief* that **the Spirit of the Lord was indeed upon him** and that **he was anointed to bring good news to the poor and proclaim release to those held captive and to help the blind recover their sight and to proclaim freedom to those oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.**

Wow! And **Jesus interpreted Isaiah’s text**. Yes, he *interpreted Isaiah’s text* because the **Isaiah text reads, “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God,”** but **Jesus omits “the vengeance of our God” part and simply stops with “the year of the Lord’s favor.”** Jesus is about **liberation, not vengeance**, and that is a **whole different narrative than those people had heard before**. No wonder he brought such good news.

If *we* are **Christ's body**, as **Paul says we are**, then **Jesus' narrative is our narrative**. At the **heart of our faith** lies **values of anointing and release, healing and liberation, God's favor, not just for us, but for all**, and **our story** will get worked out in *every moment of every day*, just as it did for **Jesus**, as **he**, and **we as his body**, seek to **live these values** in the *nitty gritty stuff of our lives*.

Vengeance is *not* a **value we hold dear**; it is *not* a **part of the story we are to tell**. And **“the other”** is **integral to our health and wholeness—we are knit together into one body, Christ's body**.

Narratives are **flying all around us, every day**, and they **spin out a forcefield** that can *draw us in before we even know it*. As **people of faith**, we **must be**, as **Jesus taught us**, **“Wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”** *Spot the narratives for what they are, a story yearning to be told. Ask piercing questions of each and every narrative and search out the values at the heart of the story.*

Reorient yourself, daily, through **prayer and study**, and **weekly**, through **coming to worship in this place, amidst this community, feeding at this table—reorient yourself to Jesus' story, to his values, to his way**. And then, **proclaim with boldness the story that he came to proclaim—the story of liberation and freedom, love and grace and favor, especially to those who are weak, lack honor, and know no respect**.

“Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,” so says **Jesus**. On *this day, January 27th, 2019*, may it be so *among us*, as well. Amen.

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