

January 23, 2022 (3rd Sunday after Epiphany)

Sermon: "Peek-a-Boo"

What does it mean to proclaim the Good News, and what exactly is happening when we hear it? What is preaching, and why do we preach?

This week, the two pieces of scripture from the lectionary screamed those questions to me. Rather than ask me to help you understand what Jesus and Ezra preached, they asked me to think about preaching itself.

How do you understand preaching here at Fonthill? Why do you Zoom in every Sunday to listen to your minister speak? What exactly is happening?

In our two scripture readings for today, scrolls are opened. In other words, a scroll containing Hebrew scripture is opened, and read, and then interpreted. Ezra the prophet unrolls the Torah scrolls that have been stored in the temple, and reads the law – the story of God's covenant given to Moses on Mount Sinai – which shows us, so deeply, how God loves us, and how God expects us to behave as those who are so loved with regards to each other. How to be God's people. In our reading from Luke, Jesus unrolls the scroll with the writings of the prophet Isaiah. In this reading, what God has already done in Exodus is proclaimed – giving sight to the blind, giving good news to the poor, granting forgiveness, setting people free from bondage and oppression. And yet, something more is added – the idea that what has happened, has happened, but that this completion is ongoing. That it *is* happening. That what has happened in the past, in the time of Isaiah, is still happening. That it is fulfilled in the hearing of the message yet again.

Every three years, as we follow the Revised Standard Lectionary, we are given the opportunity to reflect on the same scripture passages. We have heard them all before. They have been proclaimed before. They have happened to us. And yet, each time we take another crack at Luke, chapter 4, verses 14-21, or our reading from Nehemiah, and interpret these words, what has already been fulfilled, is fulfilled again in our hearing. It is repeated. It is lifted up. And, I hope, welcomed.

After Christmas, I talked about John Lennon's Christmas Song, and how, in the repetition of the message, and our failure to commit to it, that John and Yoko seemed to be criticizing the whole religious endeavour. And I have been thinking about this. During that homily, I talked to you about how repetition is a kind of chorus, that when we hear it, we rejoice to hear. That even though we may not have built the Kingdom in the last 365 days, hearing the Good News was never intended to make us feel ashamed of ourselves. That it is always something to rejoice over. I still think that.

And I also think that hearing scripture and a repeated message is also something more. It is a kind of remembering. A kind of centering. A kind of reorientation of life, our understanding.

Preaching is the repeated act of aligning us with what it is so easy to get out of whack. God in the centre. Values that are life-giving in the centre such as truth, love, respect, and hope. A remembering that the person beside us is made in the image of God too, and that it is not all about us. That we are not alone. That we live in God's world. That even though the week has perhaps kicked us and battered us, and forced us to perhaps stray, that God's word can shepherd us into the fold again. That there is light in the darkness. And comfort. And a peace we can cling to.

As I read the two scripture readings for today, I was reminded of another bit of scripture in which a scroll is opened and read from. It occurred during that terrible period in which the kings of Israel and Judah go from bad to worse, and the people turn from the one true God and embrace idols. And forget who they are. And then, King Josiah comes to power, the last good king. Josiah decides to restore the faith and save his people. And one of the ways that he tries to do this is by throwing the idols out of the temple in Jerusalem and renovating the temple. During the renovation, Hilkiah the High Priest finds a Torah scroll that the people have forgotten. He excitedly brings it to the King who is inspired by the finding, and orders a major religious reform throughout the Kingdom of Judah, instructing all to follow the Law out of fear of divine judgment for disobedience.

In this story, the scroll that is found and opened and read, and preached from, causes a sensation. The people remember who they are. They hear Good News that has been heard before, but which has been forgotten, and ignored perhaps for generations. And that proclamation of what God has already done in the writing of the scripture, was done again – anew. It was fulfilled in the hearing. The hearts and minds of a people were changed again, reoriented, recentered, and recommitted to God.

In our reading from Nehemiah, the people have just returned from Babylon, and in reading from the Torah, they remember and recommit to being God's people. In our reading from Luke, Jesus goes to the synagogue of Nazareth, and reads to them and interprets to them the words of Isaiah. And they are amazed, and they remember, and some of them recommit to God.

In the history of Western Christianity, the writings of Paul became scripture. And that scripture was pretty much available to everyone. And yet, with time and tide, sometimes bits of Paul were forgotten. It is interesting that in the history of Western Christianity, on three occasions Romans chapter 3 has been read again by a major person, and changed the course of history. Augustine, in reading about the importance of faith, became convinced that he could be a follower of Christ, and had a conversion experience that resulted in him becoming one of the most important writers about faith ever. Luther, sitting in his outhouse, is said to have read Romans chapter 3 as well, and in reading it, had an experience that resulted in the Reformation. And it was Wesley, after reading Romans 3, who felt his heart strangely warmed, so warmed that he was inspired to become the man who our religious denomination is a branch of – Methodism.

All of these men had, of course, read Romans before. But it was the re-reading of it, and reinterpreting of it, that made all the difference.

The year goes round. We cycle through the lectionary. We attempt to preach the Good News. We play peek-a-boo.

You know – that game where someone covers his or her face, and then uncovers it. Or crouches behind a chair, and then appears. Or, cranks a jack-in-the-box to the delight of the child watching, who can't believe it when the beloved face, or body or weasel, suddenly appears out of nowhere.

Piaget, the famous child development psychologist, says that the reason that children are so delighted to see our faces when we play peek-a-boo, is because they have not yet developed the ability to conserve. Very young children do not yet have that logical thinking ability to understand that things don't change if they are altered by being stretched, cut, elongated, spread out or shrunk, or concealed and then revealed. For children, when we hide our faces from them, there is a moment of anxiety, followed by extreme happiness when the miracle happens and their beloved appears.

I think as adults we understand this for physical things. We know that our beloved loves us even though they are not with us in the same room. But we have a harder time conserving ideas.

Every Sunday when the word is proclaimed from the pulpit, the faithful play peek-a-boo. "The whole world full of the children of men, all of them played that game once again. Kings and princes and beggars, too, everyone plays peek-a-boo, peek-a-boo. Thief and robber and ruffian bold, the crazy tramp and the drunkard old, all have been babies who laughed and knew how to hide, and play peek-a-boo, peek-a-boo."

Every Sunday, we become again, children of God. Every Sunday we become again, brothers and sisters in Christ. We come to God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit as children. And we confess that we have not quite been able to conserve, to keep God in the centre. And God, revealed Godself, in the scripture, we hear once again.

Peek-a-boo, says God.

And if the sermon is good, the child of God gurgles back in delight. Our hearts are strangely warmed.