

3 Epiphany – Year C – January 24, 2010
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21
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Somehow, it seems timely to open today's sermon with some thoughts on the book and movie, *The Perfect Storm*. Both are largely based on the story of a fishing boat captain and his crew, out of the port of Gloucester, Massachusetts. The captain fails to heed the numerous warnings from radar and from other boats in the area advising of several major weather systems that are rapidly converging to become one massive and highly dangerous storm. We have had our own storm these last few days. I've been watching the trees as this huge storm system has passed through dropping an amazing amount of snow and rain. Most are heavily laden with thick wet snow, but periodically as the branches bend under the weight, there is a muffled thump as the snow slides off onto the ground, and the branch springs up relieved of its burden. A few of the trees are less flexible, brittle from the long drought, diseased, or damaged from beetles and other insects. As the snow piles higher, the stress on the branches becomes critical, they cannot bear the weight, and the branches snap as easy as a matchstick.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus returns from his forty days of testing in the wilderness full of the power of the Holy Spirit. He comes back to Galilee, the heart of agricultural production in the Palestine area, and therefore the most fertile of regions. This is also a fertile region from the perspective of Jesus' broader ministry in direct opposition to the barrenness of Jerusalem, and her sterile leadership. Despite its wealth and its leaders' illusions that they are the center of power, Jerusalem has become like the cursed fig tree that will never bear fruit again. Later in Luke, Jesus will lament over Jerusalem as the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to it. The city that refuses to repent, and is left like an empty house. Meanwhile, reports about Jesus and His teaching have spread through the whole region. Although the accolades and praise that Jesus is receiving don't sound much like a storm watch, in retrospect that is precisely what they will become.

Jesus finally arrives in his hometown of Nazareth. From the key introductions to Luke's Gospel that are contained in the opening two chapters, we already know that Luke takes great care to establish Jesus and his family as faithful followers of God in the Jewish tradition. So it is no surprise to find Jesus in the synagogue on the Sabbath day, "as was his custom". In the synagogue, all adult males were eligible to read from the Scriptures, and Jesus probably asks for this particular scroll from the prophet Isaiah. The passage from which he reads is a description of the longed for Messiah, or anointed one, and the promise of God's restoration from captivity and exile. The prophet Isaiah's words are heavily focused on relief for the oppressed, release of prisoners, and a year of jubilee. Isaiah 61 verse 2 also includes something that Jesus omits from his reading namely, "the day of vengeance of our God." The storm is about to break, but not as we might expect. There is none of God's wrath and vengeance here as Jesus sits down to teach and says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In these nine simple words, Jesus precipitates the beginning of a rising storm. A storm of confusion and anger. A storm of opposition to Jesus' re-interpretation of the Law. The boom can be heard between the lines of the Scripture, and in the sheer silence of mouths closed, and eyes fixed on Him. Jesus begins His teaching by identifying Himself as empowered by the Holy Spirit, and the anointed Messiah of God. Given what He has just read, He also makes it clear that Isaiah's prophetic words are the outline of His mission and goals for ministry. For the body of Christ, then and now, this Scripture is to be fulfilled each and every day. There is an urgency and immediacy about Jesus' words, prompting us to action, without delay. The time of God's Holy Spirit is always now. Yesterday is gone, and none of us knows whether we have tomorrow or the next day. All we do know is that we have this moment in time to live out our faith, and to make a difference for Christ

this hour, this day. The word 'today' is always current, meaning that the time of God's Holy Spirit empowering each of us, truly is now. As Jesus' life would testify, the ministry of God's grace to the downtrodden of the world is to be fulfilled every day of our lives.

Throughout the Gospel of Luke, we see a distinct de-emphasis on displays of righteousness, pomp and ceremony, in favor of acts of human compassion and social justice. Jesus says that He has come to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind. Jesus has come to liberate the oppressed, to forgive all debts, return all land to its original owners, and to redeem all captives and slaves. This passage announces who Jesus is, what His ministry consists of, what His church will do. Following this passage is the response to both Jesus, and the church. In a nutshell, this is what Jesus tells His hometown friends and neighbors: I AM the one who will bring God's healing, forgiveness and release, a new vision of God, and the year of jubilee. This good news sounds great to you and me, yet Jesus words would not create a storm if they were not somehow unexpected and unwelcome, or potentially damaging. One of the problems is that the people are awaiting a conquering Messiah, who will confirm and entrench the current systems of power held by the Judean leaders, with one major change: to kick out the Roman oppressors. For anyone who is not part of the groups Jesus lists, there is an unspoken promise that everything is about to be turned upside down. In other words, to anyone who is benefiting from the current systems of power, however corrupt, Jesus' words are very threatening. They are like the darkening sky of an approaching tempest, instead of a plumb line against which to measure their obedience to God's will.

The religious leaders are supposed to be at the forefront of discerning God's will in all things. Knowing the purpose of Christ's mission on earth, defines our mission as the Body of Christ, and our individual agency as members of that Body. Books like Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Life*, have become a popular part of Christian and cultural interest. Warren captures the essence of a groundswell of spiritual yearning to know and understand life's purpose. To answer some of the big questions like who am I, what am I here for, and where am I going? Oddly enough, even with numerous quotes from Scripture, Warren never once quotes this passage from Luke's gospel. Even given that this is a profound and succinct illustration of God's agenda for the salvation of the world, achieved through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, as well as the continuing mission of the church. Even as the Judean leaders learned, we too set aside scripture at our peril. Where are you and I when we examine our lives and the lives of this community against the plumb line Jesus has set for us? How is this community of faith living out Jesus' manifesto in light of our particular and communal gifts? As Jesus' words from Luke speak to our hearts today, our work of discernment is to identify those who need our acts of compassion and kindness, as well as recognizing the ways in which we might help those who live daily with all manner of injustice. On the other hand, if we find it hard to see ourselves amongst those Jesus has come to forgive, release and redeem, then it is also important to look at the ways we too may be held captive by idols or delusions of power. Or to ask God to reveal our blind spots. Perhaps to pray about where we are poor in spirit, or why might we be fearful if the oppressed go free.

As the story unfolds, we discover that the reckless and life-ending choices made by the fishing boat captain in *The Perfect Storm* are mostly driven by financial concerns. Ultimately, it was a misplaced trust in self that led to their deaths. Putting our trust in our own ability and resources is a sure way to find ourselves overwhelmed by the storms of life, and God's purposes. Our ego can be inflexible when faced with the storm of God's love that Jesus brings. Putting our trust in God is like being a healthy tree. We are more flexible in dealing with the world's drama, because our strength is in the Lord. Well-developed roots of faith make us resilient under stress, and give us the ability to drink deeply from the life-giving waters of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord dwells within us, empowering each of us to announce the Good news of Jesus Christ to all the prisoners of the world. May the power of God's love storm the whole earth, and sweep us all into God's hands.

Amen.