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“Who Needs a Word from the Lord?”

A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Nehemiah 8:1–3, 5–6, 8–10; 1 Corinthians 12:12–31a; Luke 4:14–21

Almighty God, unto Whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from Whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love You, and worthily magnify Your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

In my treks back and forth from my home on Monticello Avenue to the First Presbyterian Church, a trip that I have made several times a day for years, I found the quickest way is to come down South Roxboro. I pass the Gethsemane Baptist Church, a little church on my left coming into town. In front of the church, there is a marquee, and it asks a simple question: “Who needs a word from the Lord?” It puzzled me at first, but as I passed it day after day, I reflect on the question, and I think, “Oh, there are a lot of people I know who need a word from the Lord! Maybe we should find somebody to give it to them!” This week, it occurred to me: *I need a word from the Lord!* I need a word that speaks to the very depths of my being, that answers some of the questions, the anxieties, the hopes and fears of my life.

In a downtown church in another city, the preacher stood to preach one Sunday. The sermon notes were arranged very carefully on the pulpit. Just as the preacher was about to begin, a man who had come into the sanctuary off the street stood up and shouted as loud as he could, “I have a word from the Lord!” The congregation

was startled, as heads swirled nervously toward the source of the interruption. It wasn't in the bulletin. What word from the Lord could this man bring to them? No one found out because the ushers immediately went into action. They asked him to follow them out of the sanctuary into a small parlor where they could speak with him. They did not dare to hear an unscripted word from the Lord.

Interesting, isn't it? Sunday after Sunday, people stand up at our lectern and read strange words from the Bible, and they say: The Word of the Lord.

And you say: **Thanks be to God!**

Nobody gets tense. No heads swirl in alarm. No ushers leap into action. Instead, people follow along in their pew Bibles. Some fold up their bulletins. Some wonder how long the service will last today.

Listen as Walter Brueggemann describes what happens: "The gospel," he says, "is a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced. It is a truth that has been flattened, trivialized, rendered inane. Partly the gospel is simply an old habit among us, neither valued nor questioned. But more than that, our technical way of thinking reduces mystery to problem, transforms assurance into certitude, quality into quantity, and so takes the categories of biblical faith and represents them in manageable shapes."¹ This is so that the mystery, the awesomeness, of the Word of the Lord slips away.

We say, "Thanks be to God" for the word of the Lord, but are we really thankful? For the Word of the Lord can be disruptive. The Word of the Lord is news. It is good news, but it is news that is a game-changer. We are not too eager to adapt to change, are we? Someone has said that when we leaf through the morning paper or watch the news in the evening, we are not interested in the news as much as we're interested in having our assumptions confirmed.

- "In Washington, politician A criticizes politician B."
- "A gunman holds up a convenience store."

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989, pp. 1-2.

- “There were more deaths in Afghanistan yesterday.”

“Yep! Sure enough, that’s just what we expected. That’s the way the world has always been and always will be.”

Good news—really good news—is unexpected. Good news means the world is not the way it was yesterday. Therefore, I cannot live my life the way I lived it yesterday. A word from the Lord—good news! Good news that means change.

The Word of the Lord has a mysterious quality to it. In that passage that was read to us from Nehemiah: the people of God, the ancient Israelites are gathered at the Water Gate—this is not the Watergate in Washington, where some shenanigans went on that stirred up this nation; this was the Water Gate of ancient Israel. A scroll was discovered, an ancient text that had been hidden in the ruins of the destroyed temple. These people had gone through a lot of ups and downs and lots of trials and tribulations. They found a word from the Lord, and they wept. They were “moved to tears” as they read the ancient Torah because they were reading words their ancestors had read, words that reminded them that, though things change and though life is often in turmoil, the word of the Lord remains. A flower fades, the grass withers and dies, but God’s word is steadfast.

It was a normal Sabbath in Nazareth, just what you would expect. A son of the synagogue had come home for the weekend—Joseph and Mary’s boy, Jesus. And so he was asked to read the lesson and say a few words. He took the scroll and he read these words: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.” And then this son of the synagogue said, “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your midst.”

No one was tense. No ushers tried to take him to a side room. People were proud of him. Think how Mary and Joseph must have been popping their buttons to have such a fine son.

But then the words sunk in. “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Today, on a winter Sunday in January—not yesterday, not sometime back in the

distant past—but today. Today these words are fulfilled—fulfilled—it's coming to pass in your very midst, in your hearing—not in somebody else's life, but today.

*Not my mother nor my brother, but it's me, O Lord,
Standing in the presence of the Word of the Lord,
Not Moses, not Abraham nor Sarah, not David nor Rebekah,
But it's me, O Lord...*

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” Jesus said. This has been called the inauguration of Jesus for his ministry, and he calls to our attention that it is not right that we live in a world of such disparity. The good news is to be preached to the poor. The poor should be given dignity, not looked down upon, not dismissed because they must have done something wrong or else they would not be poor.

This week, some of us gathered down the street at Union Baptist Church for a Faith Summit on Child Poverty. We were reminded of several things, but one of the most important is that 27% of the children in Durham county live below the poverty line. You probably heard that before. But it is sad, and I agree that is shameful. It is a disgrace. We, people of faith, in particular those who are followers of Jesus Christ, know why it is a shame, why it is a disgrace, because “the spirit of the Lord is upon you, the spirit of God’s generosity and God’s justice, not to look down on the poor, but to lift them up.” So we reminded ourselves and we want to remind our community that we have a job to do. We have work to do. Things can’t stay the way they are.

Ever since I came here, I’ve heard the alarming statistic that we’ve had 20% of our population in Durham living in poverty. We say that to each other, and then we go on doing whatever we were doing before. I think there’s a feeling now, particularly among many of us in the faith community, that it is time to heed Jesus’ words. We were reminded at the summit that politicians are very shy about talking about the poor. We talk about creating a larger middle class, but nobody says, “What about the poor?” But if you read the Bible, you listen to Jesus’ words. Jesus says, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me because God has called me to preach good news to the poor.” And good news is not just a word. It’s action. It’s reaching out to change

the lives of young people, to make sure they get a good education, that they have a fair chance in life.

This is the word of the Lord that we need to hear. We need to believe that today we are being called to use our gifts in the service of God's kingdom, a God who cared about the poor so much that he sent Christ as their ambassador.

The word of the Lord that came to us this morning is that you are gifted by God to use your gifts to the glory of God. This may be shocking, startling news, but it is good news.

The Epistle lesson which was read is from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. The church in Corinth was having a lot of trouble. There were all kinds of disputes, power struggles, theological controversy. Yet, in the midst of all of that, the apostle Paul writes to them, "Now you are the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27).

Was he teasing them? Was he making fun of them? No. I think he was very serious. This caught my attention this week. I read these words about the body and the different parts of the body hundreds of times. I probably even preached several sermons on them. But it was driven home to me this week. He did not say you might become the body of Christ if you do this or that, then you might be able to live up to the title of body of Christ. Maybe you can work your way into that. No, he doesn't say any of that. He says, "*You are* the body of Christ."

It is an amazing assertion. But it is the word of the Lord for us on this day. We are the body of Christ in this place, in this time. What I am suggesting is that faith in Christ creates new community, creates new responsibilities, creates new relationships. That is what it means to be the body of Christ. We are the visible form the risen Christ has chosen to take in the world.

Our story is that God's steadfast love always takes visible form. It has the power to overcome our differences that divide us and to enable us to make a difference to create and build the "beloved community." We are the body of Christ. On those days that you don't feel like things are going very well for you, you wonder what the next steps are going to be. Remember the word of the Lord to you and to me:

you are somebody. You do have a role to play, a purpose, a meaning in your life. You are the body of Christ.

A group of people stood before the Water Gate, and they wept when they heard God's word. In a synagogue in Nazareth, people heard the inauguration of Jesus' ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because God has called me to preach the Good News of the Gospel to the poor." We have committed to follow him. On this cold and wintry January Sunday, and around the world today, somebody is reading the Scripture. Somebody is standing up and reading about a God who called this world into being out of nothing, a God who filled the heavens with stars, a God who created and loves human beings with a wild and passionate love—all human beings, and has a particularly warm place in God's heart for the poor, the handicapped, the hurting—a God who loves this world so much that God sent his son to be among us—to raise up men and women and young people to share the good news with the poor, with those who are hungry for food, with those who are hungry for meaning, to enable us to be the body of Christ. Today, the word of the Lord has come alive in your midst.

And let the congregation say: **Thanks be to God!**

Amen.