

## The Bible – God's Gift To Us

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

Luke 4:14-21

January 24, 2010 – UM

Rev. Catherine MacDonald

Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

As you can see on the communion table, we have a variety of Bibles.

How many of you read the Bible regularly?

Do you find it easy to understand?

Do you place equal value on all parts of it?

Do you read it literally?

Or is it a collection of books filled with inspired stories?

Stories of how ancient people sought to understand their place in the world and their relationship with God.

Do we find some parts of the Bible disturbing?

Or incomprehensible?

Do we feel foolish when we don't understand parts of it.

Michelle, in her study group, Journey to the Cross, will be exploring some of those questions, along with many more, in more depth.

One of the sad commentaries on our life as people of faith is how this collection of books has been misused.

In a method called proof texting, we can take a verse or several verses out of their wider context and story and find evidence to support our particular point of view.

What I learned at theological school was to take a look at the overarching stories.

To take into consideration the historical context of the time in which a particular passage was written.

To take into consideration to whom it was written.

One of the popular sayings or questions is: What would Jesus do?

But even that is limited, because the people of Jesus time didn't face many of the situations that we do, so his teachings do not directly address those issues.

So we have to take a look at the themes of overarching stories and discover for ourselves, not 'what would Jesus do' but given what we know about Jesus and his nature, the question might be 'what would Jesus have US do?'

No matter what our experience and belief about The Bible, I think we can all agree that it is the most important book of our faith, and has been for thousands of years.

I encourage you to find a translation that you find easy to read and fall in love with scripture.

- The Bible in Pictures
- Revised King James
- Good News
- King James
- New Revised Standard Version
  - Study Bible
  - Large Print
- The Book of God

In our reading from the First Testament, we hear of Nehemiah, one of the men from the Jewish community in exile in Babylon, who had done well and risen to be a senior civil servant.

He has come to Jerusalem as governor, and taken over the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

Under his driving spirit, the walls were completed.

But something more was required.

The builders had faced down the challenge of nearby rulers, but still more was needed.

They needed a reminder and assurance of who they were.

So the people were gathered to a reading of Scripture.

And the people wept... for the first time in many years they were allowed public proclamation of their holy words...

They did not just 'hear' the words... but they were affected by them... they wept....

And in the last part of that reading Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

Go your way... eat... and share...

This sounds much like what Jesus proclaimed centuries later...

He uses Isaiah's words, "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 favour."

Nothing more... and nothing less...

What do these readings say about our world?

Perhaps especially in light of the situation in Haiti?

Three separate articles in the paper this past week have had an impact on me.

First of all, let me say that I encourage all of you to send money either through our Mission & Service Fund or one of the many other legitimate charities such as the Red Cross to help alleviate suffering and perhaps more importantly in the long run, rebuild a new and better Haiti.

But let's not forget all the organizations that we support on an ongoing basis.

Jim Meek in yesterday's Chronicle Herald describes an encounter with a Fredericton cabdriver who said believes that we should be helping the poor etc. right here in Canada.

Jim said that his words came back to him as we watched a newscast on Haiti and raises this says this,

*"I don't offer this observation to question the generosity of the Canadian spirit, but to raise an issue: Why we are so intent on helping the afflicted in other nations — and so uncomfortable about helping our own?"*

*And goes on to say, "By the way, donations to women's centres and other not-for-profit organizations fall like a stone when a quake or a tsunami devastates a foreign nation. This is not to say that charity has to start at home, but it shouldn't end abroad, either."*

The other article was about how cruise ships are still docking in one port in Haiti and also in the Dominican Republic, who has made their medical facilities and transportation available to the Haitian people.

First a confession about my lack of knowledge of some world geography.

Until the earthquake, I had no idea that the Dominican Republic was on the same island as Haiti.

And my first thought was how on earth can those travellers enjoy sitting on the beach, soaking up the sun and buying local handicrafts while just a short distance away is untold suffering.

However, in countries that rely heavily on tourism, to cut off their source of income deprives the people of income to pay for the basics of life: food, shelter, clothing.

That article made me remember a conversation I had with Rev. Allen Darby when I was a student at Rockingham United.

He and his wife Betty spent almost 20 years living and working in Haiti.

We were having a conversation about my ethical dilemma about purchasing fruit etc. from countries that have deplorable human rights records etc.

His comment was something like, “Whenever we withhold our dollars, we hurt the ones who are least able to cope with it. We don’t hurt the corporation that operates the fruit orchards, we hurt the picker, the lowest person in the chain.”

In the same way, if we stop going to the Dominican, the cruise ship operators will simply find another destination, and all those who rely on tourism will be hurt.

The third article was in this morning’s paper about the rush to provide emergency aid.

*After the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004, aid agencies clubbed together to review their efforts. The main conclusion was sobering: "It was local people themselves who provided almost all immediate life-saving action." But "international agencies often brushed local capacities aside." This lesson is relevant to Haiti now. Focused on raising money, bedevilled by disputes over logistical precedence and haunted by fears that the country is too weak to help itself, the Haiti operation shows signs of becoming an aid stampede. Like the tsunami, the earthquake has produced an outpouring of generosity amounting to \$1 billion so far. The experience of the tsunami suggests that agencies will not be able to spend it. A French NGO, Medecins Sans Frontieres, stopped emergency fund-raising, saying it did not need more. It was criticized for this, but in retrospect was justified. As the tsunami evaluation put it, "allocation and programming were driven by the extent of public and media interest, and by the unprecedented funding available, rather than by assessment and need." This seems to be happening in Haiti, too; MSF has again asked people to switch donations to its general fund. (The Chronicle Herald – Sunday, January 24, 2010)*

The people who manage our Mission & Service Fund often say that we need ongoing funds to support partnering with local organizations in hundreds of places around the world.”

And those ongoing donations enable us to immediately send money, before any fundraising has started.

I am proud of the United Church and how it works before, during and after the media barrage.

Haiti and Halifax and a hundred other places need us to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour, not just now, but everyday.

Not just in emergencies, but for life

The Bible reminds us that abundant life is for all, that the year of the Lord’s favour is for all.

This is God's gift to us.

Thank be to God, amen.