

Good News!
27Jan19

May the mumbles of my mouth and the longing of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Opening

You've likely heard of the Hadhad family. The family spent three years as refugees in Lebanon after their chocolate factory in Damascus was destroyed by a missile. They arrived in Antigonish, Nova Scotia in January 2016 as part of the influx of Syrian refugees to Canada. By August of that year they had established a small chocolate kitchen with the help local trades people and a loan from the people of the community of Antigonish. This year I saw their Peace by Chocolate boxes and bars for sale at Sobey's in Waterloo. This family went from operating a successful business, to refugee status imposed by war, to the good news of being new comers in a strange land where they were surrounded by a welcoming community. Their slogan is "one PEACE won't hurt". After the final benediction today I'll break up the chocolate bars and invited you to come forward to taste "peace by chocolate".

Lk 4

After his 40-day wilderness sojourn Jesus returned to human habitation and began teaching in synagogues. When he came to his home town Nazareth he was also given the opportunity to speak. Jesus chose to read from the prophet Isaiah:

"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"

When I prepare for a homily I usually read all the texts, beginning in the old testament, then the epistle, and finally the gospel. As I read the texts for today and came to the gospel phrase "bring good news" near the end of my reading I knew this was the lense through which to consider all the other passages we read today.

Good news. What might our texts from Nehemiah and Luke teach us about "good news".

Nehemiah

In the story from Nehemiah, hearing the Law of Moses read aloud was good news to the people returned from exile in Babylon. This reading of the Law was part of the re-establishment of the governing structure of the nation of Israel and reclaiming their identity in their homeland. We

know that hearing and understanding the Law that had been received from God was good news because that day was marked as a holiday with feasting and great rejoicing.

Luke

That brings us to Luke's record of Jesus' reading from the prophet Isaiah. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor..."

Being a little bit curious I thought to fact-check Matthew's record of Jesus' quote from Isaiah, by going back to Isaiah 61:1-2a that Jesus is quoting. I noted a few small differences. While Matthew's Jesus doesn't change the gist of the message, I still find it fascinating to consider two of these differences.

In the NRSV and the old King James Luke reads "bring good news to the poor", while Isaiah says "bring good news to the oppressed or meek". Luke includes a proclamation of sight to the blind that is not present in Isaiah, at least not that I could see.

The word for those who hear the good news in the Hebrew text of Isaiah is variously translated as "oppressed, humble ones" or "meek". I think the oppressed and the humble of Israel are those that medieval Europe would call the peasants of the land, those economically marginalized and living a life of struggle just to survive. Jesus proclaimed good news to those oppressed into poverty.

So what

What does good news along the lines of Nehemiah and Luke look like today? As followers of Jesus it is our calling to carry on the proclamation of good news. What have these few glimpses into the passages revealed about good news?

The reading from Nehemiah prompts me to ponder the experience of return to homeland. My parents and many other so called Russian Mennonites have travelled to the Ukraine to see the homeland where our people lived for nearly 200 years. Apparently the watermelons really are much better there, just as my Oma always said. Thinking about homeland also brings to mind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and the call for reconciliation between settlers and the people indigenous to this land, many of whom live in a kind of exile in what has been their homeland for 1000's of years. What can good news of returning home look like?

In Luke we read that Jesus proclaimed "he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor". Who in our community would such a proclamation of good news be addressed to? Who will hear our proclamation as good news? Will people living in poverty hear us that way? *What do we proclaim to those living in poverty and oppression in our community? What do we proclaim by our words? By our actions?*

Jesus also read Isaiah's proclamation of freedom to captives. Isaiah would likely have been referring to the people held in captivity in Babylon. But I think Jesus re-appropriated this

prophesy, and saw in it a promise of release from the captivity of sin which is the actions, attributes and ungodly values that lead to suffering, evil and destruction. I say that because of the encounters with people were Jesus healed people, and then said “go and sin no more”. What does release from bondage to sin look like for us in our time?

The story of Peace by Chocolate teaches me that to be truly good news a proclamation needs to grow from speaking into experience and action. The proclamation of unity is not good news until people who disagree love each other as God loves. Recovery of sight is not good news to a blind person unless recovery becomes an experiential reality. News for people living in poverty is not “good” until it is a practical change in their life situation. Good news for a refugee family cut off from all they’ve known is a safe place to live and friends to welcome them into a new community.

As a congregation we have proclaimed this good news to newcomers several times over the years, and are preparing to do so again. There are some clear ways we proclaim and embody good news to one another. We proclaim the good news of comfort to those with broken hearts when we sit with them in grief. When we bring meals to people in ill health or recovering from surgery. The proclamation of good news is proved by our action. If not making a real difference for people, then our proclamation of good news is proven to be simply another case of fake news.

May the Holy Spirit continually inspire us to find ways to carry forward the good news that was fulfilled by Jesus in his earthly ministry.