

THE END OF THE EMPIRE STATE OF MIND

Texts on Sunday, January 21, 2007

Nehemiah 8: 1-4a; 5-10; Luke 4: 14-21

It wasn't until seminary studies that I got Bible history straightened out in my head. We could do much better teaching religion to children and adults. I have seen teenagers get excited by the real history and complex authorship of these texts. It makes a difference to know what was going on around Ezra when he was "giving the sense" of the Bible to the assembled people. When Jesus reads from the Isaiah scroll, his hearers certainly knew who the poor and the captives were. Really knowing where the Bible is coming from will change your faith as surely as a child's world shifts when she learns where she came from.

Consider this. Just about everything in the Bible was written in relation to intense political conflict. You could say the Bible is stories and advice about learning to be human in the midst of great political forces. People often say that politics and religion don't mix. Wherever that feeling comes from, it won't wash with the Bible. Look at today's stories. Ezra is in Jerusalem some decades after the Emperor of Persia (today's Iran) clobbered Babylon (today's Iraq) and sent the Jews back home from exile. The city is still in ruins. It has no protective wall. Trade is not moving well; people are poor. There is no temple and Persia, the empire, is not eager to help the Jews build one. That ruling empire will certainly not let them govern themselves. A governor, no descendant of David, is installed instead. This tribe has almost nothing holding them together, and that is the way the empire wants it.

What does hold them together? The Torah. Stories, teachings about who they are and how they must order their lives and hopes, even in the midst of great losses at the hands of brute political forces. Into this very situation, an unknown poet used the threads of their old stories and wrote some new poems for them. One started this way:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the *anawim*, the wretched of the earth, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; . . . to comfort all who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

This, as you see, was the text that Jesus chose to mark the beginning of his ministry, a poem first spoken into that very sorrowful situation of war and destruction that had been the concern of Ezra and Nehemiah. Why did Jesus choose that text? God knows! But he was in Nazareth, his hometown, not four miles from the Roman garrison city of Sepphoris, which the empire had destroyed completely some thirty years earlier. Many people of that city had been sold into slavery by the Romans—some of them perhaps were relatives of Jesus. There you have it: Palestine in Jesus' time bore the marks of slavery, torture, captivity, poverty, and oppression, just as it had in Ezra's time, five hundred and some years earlier and in almost every generation in between. The politics of empire and brutal oppression provide the setting for virtually all the jewels of the Bible.

Now, along with our Jewish sisters and brothers, we Christians have the peculiar habit of reading old stories from the same old book. Why do we do this? In order to hang together. In order to *be* a body. Clearly, it has worked for the Jews. All the rival tribes and gods of their early days are vanished, but they are still here. Reading the Bible is about building and maintaining a healthy body. Reading the old stories is not the purpose of the body; it is food and exercise for the body, so we can do what we are called to do. Reading rightly—what Nehemiah calls "giving the sense of the reading"—matters to the health of the body.

So what is a right reading? To give the sense of the reading today, and to do so in the spirit of the

Biblical tradition, we must look at these jewels in the setting of the politics of empire and oppression in our own time. There is no option. To ignore these—to separate our faith from our political world, to turn it into a mere history lesson about their problems and their solutions of long ago—would be to mock the word of God, which, unless we yank it out of its socket, has always been super-charged with concern for the least, for the captive and the prisoner, for the poor and the oppressed. Not metaphorically, but actually poor, actually captive, actually prisoner. The health of the body of Christ depends on this kind of right reading.

In fact, in the Presbyterian tradition, the body of Christ is not very healthy. The church is dwindling and disappearing. I have my doubts that there will be a denomination called the Presbyterian Church (USA) in the year 2050. We are small in number and our public voice is thin. We are not very healthy. Where numbers appear strong, the church's voice often wraps itself in the flag of the American nation, unwilling or unable to challenge the politics of empire and oppression. The complaint that politics don't belong in the pulpit serves the interests of the powerful; Christ is made to fly lower than the flag. What is wrong with this picture? Why is our body unsound? The Bible itself offers the diagnosis. We have failed to discern the body, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 11. We have been blind to the unity we have with those whom our society fears, despises, and oppresses. We do not read our stories against the background of empire and oppression, as our forebears did. And we have made our physical body comfortable in the warm bed of wealth, a bed in which empire always provides to embed those who support it. But our spiritual body is weak and all but voiceless.

When we look around for today's Babylon, or today's Persia or Greece or Rome, we have nowhere to look but to our own nation. The United States is the empire, now; there is no rival. By definition, empire gets its way through force. It imprisons the millions, it captivates the tens of millions, it makes war. By whatever means necessary, empire takes the resources to feed its body. Empire needs religion to cover its gaudy power and its abuses in the robes of divine righteousness. This is the Bible's old story. All that's new is the name of the principal power in the world. It is our own nation.

At various times in our brief history, the Body of Christ in America has grown strong by resisting the oppression which our great empire spills on the ground. The schism that sent two dozen members of First Church out to start their own Central Presbyterian Church in 1835 was one of those struggles. The people of First Church were moved by a new school of theology which held that the conditions of oppression could be lifted, and that slavery was an evil that must be brought to an end. Old School Presbyterians did not think so. They held to the notion that through the Fall of Adam, the condition of humanity is so depraved that no political or social improvements can bear upon the ultimate destiny of individuals. Slavery, in the opinion of the Old School, was a God-inflicted evil, not to be tinkered with through politics. I find it impossible today to take pride in the theological motivations of Central's first members, but as I have said before, we are all New School now, for in the course of human events, the Old School utterly lost the theological battle. But the question of reading the times, of discerning the body, of identifying ourselves with the captives, the prisoners, the poor—that task is never past. Precisely to the degree that Christians ignore the work of resisting the empire's crushing force, the Body of Christ withers. Its muscles atrophy, it cannot walk, it cannot talk—exactly insofar as the Church refuses its work of resisting the unjust, crushing powers of empire.

Today, two million Americans are in prison. No nation in the world of whatever form, except ours, keeps 1 out of every 100 adults in prison. But we tolerate this. We pretend nothing can be done. Have you ever heard a politician promise to lower the number in prison, to proclaim release to the captives? It would be too costly, they say—we say!—to so re-work our life together in city and suburb that real education and real community and real mental health might rise and crime decrease. But we can spend hundreds of billions of dollars on a little war against a nasty little despot who sat astride the world's

second-largest oil fields. That is the work of empire.

In an interview with Terry Gross of *Fresh Air*, Kevin Phillips, once a speech writer for Richard Nixon, said that it takes thirty minutes to walk through the facts that prove that America's war in Iraq is a war for oil, a war of empire. But Americans won't give thirty minutes to understand their history. That too is empire. But you can. Read Phillips' *American Theocracy* to bring clear light on your understanding. This week, the Pentagon released new rules for interrogation of enemy combatants. The use of torture is explicitly rejected. This sounds good. But the regulations state that evidence obtained under coercion will still be admissible in military tribunals. On the news yesterday morning, Daniel Schorr asked, "Who can tell me the difference between torture and coercion in interrogation?" Why are we intent to keep torture in our arsenal? It is the spirit of empire. Our little war is soon to surge, they say; 21,000 more soldiers are to be sent into Iraq. Threats are being brandished against Iran and Syria. Will we really let our leaders turn the whole world into a cauldron of violence? And who is "we," anyway?

When he had sat down with all the eyes of the congregation turned upon him, after saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim good news to the wretched of the earth," Jesus said, "Today in your hearing, this scripture is fulfilled." What an odd thing to say. Nothing happened. The abuses, the gravest sorrows of empire continued the next day and the next day. Why did he say that? Jesus was teaching a new way to tell the old story, a way that was going to become audible to more than just Jews. That is, of course, the great breakthrough of Christianity, that the word that God had shown to the Jews and which has still been held, cherished, nourished, and fired by Jews, could be heard by more tribes. Jesus was offering a way to let the future come into the present—not just waiting for the future, but actually judging the present on the terms of the future, judging empire on the terms of the future kingdom as really real, really present.

Now, what would be sign of this judgment? It is the marks in his own body, his own sacrifice on the cross. And we tell that story. We form our own body around the story of one who was made captive and wretched, tortured and slaughtered by empire—the Roman empire. That's our "body-forming" story. The question of the health of our body as the body of Christ depends on our walking this walk wherein we have been told that the stripes on his body have made our body whole. Those stripes must show on our body, if we are to read this story right. We must be prepared as a body to resist empire. The testimony that we will be required to make in coming years and decades will grow only the more difficult, for this empire in which we live is vast and hungry and greedy. This requires a strange decision on the part of Christians who live within the Body of Christ: be sure that the standard of Christ is flying higher in your heart than the flag. By signing on as a member of the Body of Christ, you have placed yourself in the citizenship of the world Body of Christ, far prior to your American citizenship. God calls you and me to make judgments on this empire and to stand and suffer its insults if necessary, that there be good news preached to the poor, liberty to the captive, the prisoners released, the acceptable year of the Lord proclaimed. The only future for the Church is to become this body, marked—not with nice projects, not as mere friends, but as servants who bear the marks of the very Body of Christ.

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