

Epiphany 3
 Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM
 Baptism of Kendel Susanna Bush

January 24, 2016
 Rev. Paul Moore

A New Creation

I can imagine Jesus going home for a visit. He's been out teaching and preaching and working miracles in Galilee. He's the great sensation of the day, and everybody loves him. But he goes home for a visit to Nazareth. Nazareth is an industrial town, the largest one around. There's Roman money here as well as Greek education. It's no sleepy Glenwood or Datil. It's the county's Silver City.

He goes to "the synagogue," though you have to think that there may very well have been more than one. Now I'm sure word of his successes in Galilee had filtered over to Nazareth, so when the attendant at the "Ark," that is, the place where the scrolls were kept, sees him come in he sees a golden opportunity. He gives Jesus the scroll. The way that worked was that any male present could be asked to read a portion of the Old Testament and comment on it. Your Hebrew School education prepared you to be able to do this. Jesus unrolls it to Isaiah 61 and reads, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has appointed me..."

I can hear them saying, "Nice start, Jesus, tell us about your miracles in Galilee."

"...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 favor."

"Nice development, Jesus. We know where this came from. We know our history. We remember how we were enslaved in Egypt, and then led out of slavery by Moses. We remember how we were carried off into exile in Babylon, and then brought home under the twin leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, and we remember the struggles we had trying to figure out how to live again after such a devastating event."

"And we know that since that time, except for a few brief moments between the Greek and Roman empires, the dream of the people to have once again a sovereign state, with a king like David, has at once filled us with hope for the future Messiah, and with discontent with the present. This is the hope of Israel, always strung between the promise and the reality."

Then Jesus drops the bombshell. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your

hearing."

I'm sure the place went deadly silent. What possibly could he mean?—not that answers to that question were not forthcoming. A thousand answers must have flooded through people's heads and hearts. Does he intend to launch a rebellion against Rome? (Been that, done that, wasn't fun—and we got our butts kicked!) If he doesn't mean that, then what does he mean that captives will go free? How will the blind see? What can he possibly mean by "the year of the Lord's favor?"

What he said had to have had an affect on every person there. If they felt on the down side of life it was hope. If they were on top of the heap this was scandalous. You couldn't ignore this. You either loved Jesus or hated him. The Gospel Jesus preaches, the Gospel that Jesus IS, is a bombshell. You will either love it or hate it. It will either captivate you or repel you. If you haven't been challenged like that you haven't really been accosted by the person of Jesus Christ.

We as moderns have heard this story before. We see Jesus through the lens of the Church's history, whether we like it or not. We see Jesus' words here as announcing his healing and preaching ministry, and he is. But there is more.

We also see this passage through the lens of our modern North American mindset. Borrowing from the Greeks, and filtering it through medieval Neo-Platonism and through the scientific eye of the Industrial revolution, we are very quick to spiritualize this passage. The ones in prison are the ones who are tortured by addictions and other personal demons. The ones who are poor are those who suffer from low self-esteem. The blind are those who cannot see what is really going on in the world. These meanings are not unfaithful to the text, but they only deal with half of it.

If we don't spiritualize then we talk about social justice. This is about those who are wrongly incarcerated, this is about those who do not have sufficient income to pay their bills, this is about those who cannot see the effects of their actions on the less fortunate.

Or we buy out completely: "That's nice Jesus. Good on ya, go for it. I'll stand over here and watch."

Jesus, being a good Jew, would not have drawn a line down the middle of the human soul. Both approaches would have been in his mind; both concerns would have been addressed. This is why what he said was a bombshell. Jesus is not talking about patching up what's wrong with society, Jesus is talking about rebuilding it from the bottom up.

This morning we baptize a beautiful baby girl. The family's ties to this parish go way back. As we welcome Kendel into our Good Shepherd family we also welcome her into the Family of God.

What does it mean to be a baptized person? It means to be involved in the remaking of human society that Jesus launched with his own baptism. We are baptized into Christ, which means that the words of Isaiah 61 apply to us and to this little one as well. Here Isaiah 61 has its personal and spiritual expression. Here we have help with our own demons, here we find riches for our poverty, here we get sight for our blindness.

It also means to take one's place in the new society being formed by Jesus. This society is not just a repeat of what happens outside these doors, it is the new thing that God is doing in the world through Jesus. In this society the I and the WE are both important. As St. Paul teaches us in the Epistle lesson today, we need one another. One part cannot disassociate itself from another part just because we don't like or disagree. We are all in this together, for the work of God is not merely new human beings, but new human society where unconditional and self-giving love is the coin of the realm and not selfish ambition. Here Isaiah 61 has its social expression. We are committed to finding freedom for those unjustly imprisoned, dislocated, or persecuted. We are committed to fighting the indignity and injustice of the trap of poverty in our land, and we are dedicated to shining the light of truth in the corners of our society where darkness allows evil and injustice to rein.

Obviously, this is a tall order for this little one. She is going to need some help. Where do you think she will get it? She'll get help from her parents, to be sure, and her godparents, and from the work of the Holy Spirit in her life drawing her to all truth and awakening in her the image of God that is her spiritual birthright. But she also needs help from the community of the faithful, you and me. We, who are her spiritual family, also commit ourselves to renew our own baptismal covenant, and to support this person in her life in Christ.

We need one another. She needs us, and we need her. This is what it means to be the community of the Baptized. Will you do this for Kendel? Will you do this for one another? Will you do this for God? If so, then answer with me the call of God in this moment and reply,

I will with God's help. I will with God's help. I will with God's help.