

***“We have been sustained by you ever since we were born; from our mothers’ womb you have been our strength; our praise shall be always of you. “ Psalm 71:6***

Well, we made it through the snow storm. And thanks heavens, it wasn’t as bad as it might have been for us!

My sermon this morning is prompted by our Annual Meeting last week. Christine showed up pictures of Martha Baer and Jacqueline Kuhn. And although we didn’t see her, we felt Alice Tweed’s presence in our presentations. We miss them all. But that has brought back up for me something that has been on my mind last summer, last fall and now. With the loss of our three dear friends, Alice, Martha and Jacqueline, we are left with grief and a **hole in our collective parish heart** where their laughter, music, service to parish and community... was... for decades.

I asked this question when I returned after sabbatical. It was September and I wanted to know, what are your favorite, inspiring passages? What are your sister, brother or mother’s favorite verses? Not sure? You know, I didn’t know what my mother loved from the Bible. I’m no different.

So, for me, we not only have a hole in our hearts at the loss of Alice, Martha and Jacqueline, we have a **hole in our faith** as well. We are very good at companionship, we take care of our community and we delight in the beauty of our music and art programs.

But what of Scripture? This is the season of light; the light that guided the Magi to Jesus, the light of the Holy Spirit that illuminated Jesus at his baptism, and the light that guides us all our days. In this season of Epiphany it is just the right time to ask ourselves; which of God’s words are particularly luminous to us?

Last week at Sunday School, the students and I looked at illuminated Bibles and practiced making our own. And we talked together about the beauty of colors and shapes that highlight our Biblical texts, ancient and new. Just as the light comes through our newly restored stained glass windows and illuminates scenes from the life of Jesus, the Bible is here in our midst to light our lives and lead us to the presence of Jesus.

And so I ask you again, what words do you use to light your life? If you gaze at your bulletin now you will find some wonderful comfort there in the passages from Psalm 71 – *“Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe.”* Or from First Corinthians 13 – *“and now faith, hope and love abide, these three. And the greatest of these is love.”* These are some of the Bible’s most inspiring words and soaring verses.

Let’s write them in a journal, or keep them in a file on our computer or phone. But, more importantly, let’s write them on our hearts. Jeremiah, later in the same book of his prophecy we just

heard, will tell the people *“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jer. 31:33 NRS)*

The reason this is so important to us, as Christians, as disciples of Jesus, is because to know our texts is to know God’s grace, God’s will, God’s promises for us. This is not simply an exercise to be able to spout how much we know. *“We don’t need to know more. We want to be more.”* This phrase is from Eugene Peterson, who wrote a book that is very important to my life of faith. The title is *Eat this Book*. And Jeremiah, our prophet of the day does eat the book. <sup>16</sup> *Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts. (Jer. 15:16 NRS)*

Well, the truth is that **if** we are going to eat up the Bible, prophets, and psalms, letters and Gospels, we are **not always** going to receive a sweet meal. God’s Word, in the mouth of Jeremiah or the mouth of Jesus will bring light, and truth...maybe not always so much comfort.

And that brings us to today’s Gospel reading from Luke. It is a continuation of the story of Jesus preaching in his hometown of Nazareth. The story starts out in such a promising way and we get so much detail from Luke’s recounting of the event that we can really visualize ourselves in that synagogue, watching Jesus come forward, receiving the scroll, unrolling it and reading from the Prophecy of Isaiah.

After Jesus reads gracious words from Isaiah – God’s promises that the poor, the captives, the oppressed will be lifted up - Jesus receives compliments as the young preacher who has come to preach in his own hometown and wow the crowd with his knowledge and his wisdom...even at such a young age.

I can just imagine one parishioner in that synagogue leaning close to the one next to him and whispering, “I knew that boy when he was just knee high to a grasshopper and look at him now.”

The parishioners lean in to hear more of how God has promised the people of Nazareth that they will receive sight, and be freed from oppression.

And then, Jesus takes an unexpected turn. Unlike me, Jesus doesn’t care if he is “liked” by his congregation. He doesn’t feel the need to please his hometown crowd. He is God’s son. He is there to tell God’s truth. That truth is that the promises of God made through the mouth of Isaiah were not meant for just some. The light of God shines on everyone and is not exclusive to Nazareth, or the Hebrew people.

No, Jesus has a different message than the one that the parishioners think he is delivering. Jesus is bringing a revelation to them. God’s promises are just as much for the widow at Zaraphath and Naaman the Syrian. Both foreigners. Both non-Jews. It’s not just something they were not expecting to hear. It’s shocking. It’s offensive. It cannot be true. They suddenly realize that Jesus was not who

they thought he was. And they turn on him and want to kill the messenger...with the hope that the message he brought would die with him as well as they tried to push Jesus over a cliff.

It didn't work that day. The forces of darkness tried to win but we know better. *The light shines in the darkness and the darkness could not, (cannot), overcome it.* (John 1:5)

That's a great one too. You probably remember that one of my very favorite verses is from Deuteronomy, *"I set before you this day life and death. Choose life."* (Deut. 30:31) *I made all the kids on a youth trip I led back in 2006 choose a verse and I made dog tags for them all with their verse.*

The verses that we choose to remember, and write down may be uplifting, may be comforting or may be to give us a kick in the pants. Our own library of verses and passages will include words of God's truth; words that remind us to be humble, open hearted, just, generous.

Pick up your Bible this week. Get out your notebook. This is one way to eat the book that is God's Word. It's not so we can know more. It's so we can be more. Write on your heart verses that shock and appall, top open our eyes, as well as things that calm and encourage us. This is what we will draw on when times are difficult, sorrowful or perplexing.

We follow the Man who brings us light, and life so that we can draw upon his words that help us to live into our true God-filled selves.