

Sermon for 23 January 2022 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Scriptures Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19 (UM750); 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

“Act One”

I live in this big old house.

It was a bargain. It changed my life. For almost two decades, we raised children, got involved, helped change the neighborhood from a declining, elderly one to a bouncing city renewal community.

Looking back on it, I can see there were racist streaks in my attitude. It was mixed, but essentially white, and while we and the young families we attracted (I got a real estate license early on and promoted it as a great family environment), it was always more comfortable because it didn't “turn” racially as so many neighborhoods did then.

For years after the boys grew up and moved away and my wife went her own way, I had roomers ... a graduate student, often from overseas, was always grateful for the space and quiet, and gave a little financial help on the mortgage; but lately, since CoVid, I've been alone, still enjoying the space, lonesome, wondering ...

It's still “Act One.”

The furniture, the renovations, even many of the neighbors, and certainly, the flavor of the community, are all what I've delighted in from the beginning, or as I worked and refinished and entertained and just sat on the back porch and listened, enjoyed, lived and prayed through life.

Today's one of those rush jobs where the big picture's been painted but there's a hush for the story to unfold. God has come: Epiphany... and even the baby has grown up and left, developed, ... and for a moment, he returns, opens up the scroll, and reads. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your presence.”

God is here. The Spirit of God is on the face of the waters. The real beginning is with us, among us. Psalm 19 guides us in that awe that is the only genuine, realistic, healthy response to the universe. Nehemiah says there is a book we've found that brings sense into all the mystery around and within us, and reads it to the people all day while the leaders, returned with them from captivity in far away places and ready to walk with them the walk they always knew was right for them. Paul says “You ... we ... are all in this together, and loving each one of ourselves and bringing space for every

special type and trait into the common program, is the heart of God's love, God's plan, for everything."

But it's still Act One. That's not wrong. It's profoundly right. We're all always just getting started, in the Jesus story. He's been away, but he's returned. It's just for a minute, 'though we don't know that; it seems so natural, and he feeds us, or shares our meal with us, and we begin to grow and hope and venture out a bit ...

This is where we are. What did Churchill say on the wireless early in the Battle of Britain? "This is not the end. This is not even the beginning of the end. It is, however, the end of the beginning."

What do you see today, here, among your friends and hearing the familiar words and music, even in the silences? We are prepared for something. Not done, but started. What special charge are you sensing, or even turning away from? Why this text, this Sunday? What got you up and brought you this far, into this warmth and relative security?

It can go on. God can wait. Jesus sat down.

Let us pray:

Dear Friend, come closer. Tolerate our wonder. Encourage our long-time knowing of you.

Look at us. Look the other way, so we can look within more than we usually do.

We know so little, but we do know love when you sit among us.

Give us the full treatment of tenderness we are created to receive.

Heal us. Call us. Turn us to the right. Prepare us. Use us.

We feel almost ready.

We confess.

Let the work begin.

Amen.