

WE BRING GOOD NEWS TO LIFE

A Sermon on Nehemiah 8 & Luke 4:14-21—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart
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1.

There is a certain corporation that announced its headquarters will move out of Connecticut. This corporation shall not be named. My maternal grandfather worked at a factory for said corporation. People even abbreviate our children's hyphenated last name, Grant-Eckhart, to match the not-to-be-named-corporation's initials. I therefore had felt a kinship to that corporation. But now, regardless of whether the corporation is leaving due to a better location or a better tax break, this feels bad, feels like **bad news** for Connecticut.

I'm reminded of the corporation-that-shall-not-be-named's commercials from the 1980's—"We bring good things to life!" And they did make it possible for so many products to be manufactured and innovated. Back then, they were building all sorts of things: jet engines, furnaces, but also oversized boom boxes, portable cassette players, computers whose memory was impressive at the time. I remember most clearly though their good old incandescent light bulbs, the soft white bulbs that were claimed to give natural light in commercials with Pachelbel's Canon in D playing in the background. Well, this year the corporation's headquarters will change, because times have changed and the corporation's hopes has changed. Perhaps they will still bring new things to life and new things to light from Massachusetts. We'll see.

2.

Both Ezra in today's Nehemiah story and Jesus in today's story from Luke proclaim God's presence among the people, each trying to bring not just good things but Good News to life.

First, Ezra. He's the head priest in Jerusalem, the big city of the Hebrew people, when the exile ends. Hebrew leaders had been carted off to far-off Babylon, but after a dark seventy years, new light breaks forth and their descendants are allowed to

return to their homeland. The Hebrews who were left behind in Jerusalem welcome them back to help rebuild together. Together they start not by bringing a new thing to life, but an old thing back to life anew: the wall around the city. The wall had been destroyed and needed to be rebuilt for people to feel safe. When the wall is finished, governor Nehemiah and priest Ezra gather all the people together so that Ezra can shed some light on the tradition that they are to embody together. Ezra reads them the Torah, the first books of the Hebrew Bible. Not just reads to them but interprets it too. Now the Torah includes a whole series of laws about living as God's people in Israel. And the Israelites hear this like dark clouds of judgment approaching them. The Hebrews experience some combination of grief that these laws were neglected for so long and fear of what these laws mean to their situation. 'Oh, crud! I haven't honored my father and mother; I never observed the Sabbath! What's going to happen to me now?' So the people start sobbing uncontrollably. 'We're in trouble! We're up a creek without a paddle! How are we going to do at that stuff we just heard? How are we going to bring this law to life? This seems like BAD news!' They freak out.

To which Ezra, Nehemiah and the priests then say, 'Whoa, hold your horses, Hebrews! No need to lose heart, no need to grieve! This is a good day, this is good news! The tradition does not bring darkness but the light of God's hope and love! We have re-engaged the tradition of our ancestors, we have re-engaged God this day as a people. Yes, this is a solemn moment, a scary moment, hearing laws many of us had long forgotten, but we are starting anew this day, and we should give thanks to God, to this Word and to our hearing of it. So eat, drink and celebrate this day. This reunion between exiles and those left behind, and this reminder of God's word, these are the next bright and shining chapter

of God's good news. We have the opportunity to bring that good news to life through this transformed community.' There may be some bad news today, Ezra and Nehemiah say, some big changes for us, but there is good news coming to life through it.

3.

Jesus also helps bring good news to light and to life by engaging Hebrew Scripture. Jesus, fresh off his forty days in the desert, has started a synagogue tour, and arrives in his hometown. 'Okay, you want me to read from Isaiah? How about chapter 61, verses 1 and 2: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'" From there Jesus doesn't just say, 'May God add rich blessings to this reading of holy word.' No, he rolls up the scroll, looks everyone in the eyes and says, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

What did he just say? This scripture has been fulfilled in hearing it? Is he saying the 'me' in the reading is us, the hearers? Is he saying that when we hear the reading aloud the Spirit works through us so that we can bring the prophecy of the Lord's favor to life? I think that's partially true. Both those original listeners and we who heard these words just now, the word enters our ears and potentially our hearts and minds. Just as the elements of communion become a part of us and we bring communion to life, we also by responding to and acting on the words we hear read, interpreted by others or interpreted by ourselves bring that story to life. The Good News that God is with us brings us to life in a new way. Especially if we have forgotten this good news or not heard it before, then we may have an epiphany, a glowing light turn on not above our heads but from within us that makes us glow with God's love.

So I think that Jesus in part was speaking of the Good News coming to life through us. But more provocatively, the 'me' in the reading can also refer

to Jesus, whom God has brought to life and anointed to preach good news. In this epiphany season God calls us to experience Jesus as God with us. God pitching a tent as John the Evangelist writes. God bringing news that life is not supposed to be about holding people back, disabling them, dividing them into us and them. But that through Jesus God's favor breaks into the world for everybody. This is scary because it means that God has a claim on all of our lives and all our ministries. And we have claims on each other to love each other as neighbor and as sisters and brothers in Christ. In this season we suggest that the magi worship Jesus and that we can worship him and be transformed by his light and life. In this season we suggest that we are bound together as Christ's body through God's love for each and every one of us.

This week Larry Urban showed me a viral video that I had first seen last year. An Australian pastor who goes by J. John is being interviewed, and he shares a way he brings Good News to light and to life¹:

"People often say to me, they say, 'J. John, what do you do? It's always very difficult what to say. Because if I say to you that I'm a Reverend, which I am, that conjures up certain images in people's minds as to what I might be. So I like to be a little bit creative in telling people what I do. I sat next to this lady on an airplane...and I said, 'Hello!' and she said, 'Hello.' I said, 'What do you do?' So she told me. Then she said, 'What do you do?' And I said, 'Well...I work for a global enterprise.' She said, 'Do you?' I said, 'Yes, we've got outlets in nearly every country in the world.' She said, 'Have you?' I said, 'Yes we have.' I said, 'We've got hospitals and hospices and homeless shelters. We do marriage work, we've got orphanages, we've got feeding programs, educational programs.' I said, 'We do all sorts of justice and reconciliation things.' I said, 'Basically we look after people from birth to death.' She went, "WOWWW!" And it was so loud, her 'Wow,' that loads of people turned round and looked at us.

She said, 'What's it called?' I said, 'It's called the church...' And that's it, if we are a follower of Jesus, we are part of a global enterprise."

I can only imagine how a light bulb went on in that woman's head in a new way, an epiphany that this church that she may or may not have engaged before was doing and being something special and profound in God's name.

While the Good News of Jesus doesn't grow old or become obsolete we do have to engage people in creative and new ways to shed light on what really happens in faith and faith community.

We didn't create God's Good News, God creates the Good News and us. We don't have a patent on Good News, we don't have exclusive rights on it. But if we engage the Bible and our tradition and the world today and our conscience and the Holy Spirit we can be instruments, we can be conduits, conductors of that light and life that Good News that comes from God and Jesus. And if we can incorporate that Good News in our life together as

a congregation and our life back home, if we can live the law of love as Christ declared, then no matter how people respond to us, no matter where we go, no matter how dark things get, God's love will light our path. Even if this difficult time in the life of my friends and this church's youth ministry, I see the soft light of God's love shining. Even in the midst of transitions of leadership in the church, I see the glow of God's love shining here among us.

So when we look at the reports and budgets and nominating sheet, yes there are words and numbers and names, but those are ministries and contributions and people who have been brought together by God to bring Good News to life in this region, to incorporate faith here both in the tradition of those settled here 377 years ago but also as John Robinson said to the Pilgrims long ago, to see that new light and truth breaks forth from God's holy word today.

We receive God's word. We receive challenging but good, good news. We bring that Good News to life as Christ's body. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6TGxKvSqH8