

The Reverend Renee L. Fenner
Episcopal Church of All Saints and Ascension
3rd Sunday after the Epiphany/Annual Meeting/Year C
January 23, 2020
Text: Luke 4:14-21

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.” Amen!

Many of you are probably familiar with *The Color Purple* which was written by Alice Walker and published in 1982. Her book was a controversial best-seller and won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and then later was adapted into a movie and later into a Broadway production.

The story centers on the main character, Celie, who from her early life had largely been abused and misused in every way possible. Celie “survived” her trials by writing letters to God. One of the other main characters we love and hate is Albert Johnson aka “Mister”. And if we know the story, Mister was a widower who had his eyes set on Shug, a jazz singer and his sometimes mistress, and on Celie’s younger sister, Nettie. Mister asked for Nettie’s hand in marriage and was offered Celie’s instead. Their father who we find out later is their step-father; calls Celie ugly but can work like a man. Grudgingly, Mister takes Celie. She did indeed work, cleaning Mister’s house and taking care of his mean children. It did not take long for Celie her to realize that Mister is also mean and abusive. The only one who really loved her was her sister Nettie. Nettie comes to live with Celie but not for long. Because she rejected Mister’s advances, he got back at them both by forcing Nettie to go away but not before Nettie promises to write her sister. No letters came and the years go by, and life such as it was, happened. They were not golden years by any stretch of the imagination but in the midst of the dismal life handed Celie, she finally found someone who loved her *and* the promised letters from her sister that Mister had hidden from her all those years. One Easter evening everything is about to change when Celie announced that she was leaving Mister. Enraged, Mister stood to raise his hand to strike her when Celie found her voice and cursed Mister. Celie leaves and Mister’s house and land go to pot. He is indeed, cursed! In the musical number “*Mister’s Song/Celie’s Curse*”-Mister angrily questions why everyone is happy but him. He claims to need no one-no one to mess with him or to tell him “*Who he is and who he ain’t.*” He sings that

his father beat him, his first wife got killed, his crops are ruined, and what others say about his mean reputation is true. And he bemoans the fact that everyone else seems to be living just fine. But what about him? But then he realized that he cannot continue to blame his misfortunes on anyone but himself. And he realizes that in order to get from out of Miss Celie's curse it is he who needs to change. Mister's sings:

*Nothin' i say
Change people mind about me.
Ain't gon' be nothin' i say,
Gon' be somethin' i do.
Maybe all my good lay ahead of me.
Ain't gon' be nothin' i say,
Gon' be somethin' i do.
Maybe everything i do.*

From that point, Mister is a changed man for the good and eventually his actions do speak louder than his words. He knows "*Who he is and who he ain't.*" He becomes a redeemed man after all.

None us came out of the womb knowing who we are and who we are not. Life evolves. We can all think back over our lives and recall how we tried to figure things out what life is supposed to be about and figure who we were, who we wanted to be, who we could be. *Who we is and who we ain't.*

And then there is today's Gospel when Jesus came into his own. By the 4th chapter in Luke's Gospel, Jesus has been baptized and had been led into the wilderness to be tested. Filled with the power of the Spirit, Jesus returned to Galilee and taught and preached in synagogues. He had made quite the impression. But it was with *this* event in his hometown of Nazareth, that Jesus came into his own and came into an understanding of *who he was* and what his life's work was to be about.

Jesus has come home to Nazareth and to people who knew him and loved him and to the place he must have worshipped many times growing. He is handed the scroll and from the scroll he chooses and reads the passage from Isaiah which speaks of the One who is to bring good news to the poor, release to those who are

captive, recover sight to the blind, set those who are oppressed free, and proclaim “the year of the Lord’s favor.”

He rolled the scroll back up. Sat down and said:

“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Everyone waited for what he might say. They waited and yet, Jesus has preached his sermon.

Centuries of waiting have ended. He is the One that the prophet Isaiah had written about. He is the One who was confirmed at his baptism as the One when the heavens opened and the Spirit descended as a voice from heaven was heard to say, “You are my Son the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” And on *this day* in the synagogue Jesus spoke his mission loudly and clearly because he comes to know *who he is*: he is the one to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, bring sight to the blind, set people free and announce God’s favor, God’s abundant blessings to everyone.

We know as readers of the Gospels that Jesus stayed true to his mission. It didn’t matter to him whether others questioned where he came from, what his background was or how he came to teach and preach with such authority. Jesus was willing to live out his mission and God’s plan until his death on the cross knowing that others would be prepared to pick up God’s work in the world.

And Jesus’ ministry and his work continues through us, his Body, the Church. The Spirit, his Spirit, continues to be upon us so that we too may be the Good News, so that the poor may be fed, so that those held captive will be freed from whatever binds them down or holds them prisoners, so that the sightless may see the light of Christ, so that people are set free and truly know that God is all about loving and blessing all of God’s children.

This is our Annual Meeting and I suspect that today there are Annual Meetings going on today as well. Like other Episcopal parishes there is business to attend to, reports to be made, the election of new Vestry members and delegates, and of course, ‘thank you’s’. And we celebrate and remember all that was 2021.

2021 was a year of challenges such as facing our financial situation and the upkeep of our facility; keeping ourselves engaged with each other and inviting others into joining the work of our various ministries and in worship; finding ways to keep ministries going and being church both in person and via Zoom; feeding

our neighbors; engaging in hard conversations about next steps and name changes; being engaged in the life and work of the diocese, and saying good-bye to parishioners and friends who have gone before us -all this in the face of COVID.

And 2021 was also a year of blessings (Thanks be to God) as during the first part of the year we became engaged in the work of the trio of North County Churches as we helped create a communal garden to provide nutritional food to those without food security. And at the end of the year, we were able to again engage ourselves w/St. B, St. S, and Trinity, CWE in partnering to make Christmas a little brighter for the residents of St. Vincent's Home for Children. Last year, we found those times to rejoice when we were able to be together in-person to celebrate Eucharist and the Celebration of New Ministry. We rejoiced with those among us-our young people and our more seasoned members who were recognized for their more public accomplishments, in school, the secular world, and within the diocese. Last year we were able to hire a new Minister of Music, Rick. What a blessing! We had a successful season of giving. We were and are blessed by a bishop who cares for the wellbeing of this diocese and for the people and ministries of the Episcopal Church of All Saints and Ascension. We were and continue to be blessed by each individual and we give thanks to God for our administrative assistant, Karen, and for the ministry of Rev. Jamal, and for all of our committees and teams, liturgical ministers, Vestry, our wardens and ALL who faithfully kept their hands on the plow. And yes, we give thanks to almighty God for the beautiful space that has been created upstairs. Phase 1. We have truly been blessed and God will continue to bless us!

Still there are some hard truths that we face in this new year in the areas of budget, ministries, commitments, and identity. And we must face them as Mister faced his realization of *who he is and who he ain't*.

In truth and love I say this: With all my heart I believe that we are to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus. We have been gathered together at this time and in this place (or where ever we are at the moment) to make disciples and show others the way to Jesus. I believe that the Episcopal Church of All Saints and Ascension is meant to be the beacon on this hill and in this community. I believe that we are to live out the mission and visions statements set before us which are:

M: To be the Light of Christ that builds relationships in our congregation, our community, and with our God.

V: Finding Christ in Relationships

And I believe, my friends, that we need the collective vision, the help, the hands, the feet, and the heart of every member of this congregation. Not just mine, not just the Vestry members we will be electing in a little while, not just a faithful few, but all of us. As Paul wrote in his First Letter to the Corinthians: “*...the body does not consist of one member but of many... (we) are the Body of Christ and individually members of it...*” We are a church with members endowed with fantastic gifts. And we define *who we are and who we aren’t*. Sisters and brothers, we can dream, we can vision, we can plan but unless we have the real conversations and do the real work—we are just skimming the surface. We cannot continue to talk the talk but we must walk the walk. Going forward, transformation, growth, ministry within these four walls and in the community will not happen by osmosis. We have got come from out of the desert like Jesus did and claim our vision and claim our mission or we will perish. It won’t matter if we have a new altar or pulpit or any of those wonderful furnishings upstairs if we are not able to claim who we are or where we want to go and the mission set before us.

Bishop Deon:

Who do we want this congregation to be for this community?
What makes us unique in this community?
How is that uniqueness reflected in our space? In our gatherings?
In how we are known?
How do we want to be seen outside these walls?
How do we communicate our message beyond our walls?

Our call/our task is not just to love one another but to share the love of God with others. Our call/our task is not just to squeak by financially and hope that diocese will always come to our rescue but to be self-sustaining. Our call/our task is not just to say we have all these ministries and then have one or two or a handful of folks do all the work but to find that ministry or a couple of ministers and let us all pitch in and do it well. Our call/our task is not just to be self-serving within these four walls but to be of service to those around us. Our call/our task is not just to survive but to be faithful. Our call/our task is not to continue to live in the past but to go boldly into the future. Our call/ our task is to follow Jesus. **To be the Light of Christ that builds relationships in our congregation, our community, and with our God. To Find Christ in relationships.**

Throughout Scripture, we are often reminded that we are loved by our God. And we are also reminded that we are not to be afraid. Change is hard. But change is also a blessing.

One of the best sermon illustrations I have ever heard was the story Valerie gave us last week. I told folks who stayed online after our prayer service was over that I had never heard of the book, *Who Moved My Cheese?* But wouldn't you know it, a kind soul sent me a copy of *Who Moved My Cheese?* And I gobbled it up! No pun intended. And sure enough, last week's preacher was right on point!

I want to piggyback on Valerie's sermon for just a moment because some of us are in some ways, like those two Littlepeople, Hem and Haw, who basked in the past and memories of the good old days and forgot to look around themselves in the process. They thought everything was okay until the cheese ran out. And they naively thought that more cheese would simply come to them and it didn't. If you remember the story, they were afraid to venture out, so much so that both grew weaker and weaker until Haw finally decided to venture out. And he was terrified but he kept going as he realized that moving in a new direction would help him find new cheese. He realized that when he stopped being afraid, he discovered there was new energy in moving forward. And Haw realized that when he went from dreaming and imagining and letting go of the old stuff that you get exactly what you want.

We are the Body of Christ, called by our very baptisms to live out the mission of Jesus TOGETHER. ***THIS IS WHO WE ARE. WHAT WE ARE TO BECOME, WHAT WE ARE LIVING INTO CAN ONLY BE DEFINED BY US.***

*Ain't gon' be nothin' we say,
Gon' be somethin' we do.*

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us. The Spirit who says today and every day 'do not be afraid.' The Spirit who says 'walk together children and don't you get weary.' The Spirit who tells us to let go and go ahead and create something new.

The words of the Prophet Isaiah spoken through Jesus that gave him direction and vision, are written for *us*:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon us,
because he has anointed us
to bring good news to the poor.*

*He has sent us 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.**

Amen!