

Sunday, February 3, 2013
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
God Birthed in Us
Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:21-30

What we experience often shapes us deeply.

Being in Elkhart last week at AMBS at Pastor's Week reminded me of Heather's birth.

We had just finished youth group on Sunday night and Lynne started having contractions. I thought I had time to shower, but Lynne said the contractions were 5 minutes apart
– “that can't be that close already, I shouted back”
– and off we were to Elkhart's hospital.

It was a difficult delivery
– no matter how much Lynne pushed, Heather did not want to be born.

The natal monitor showed that Heather was going into distress.

I mentioned to the doctor that Lynne's mother and grandmother both had pregnancies where the umbilical cord was wrapped around the neck of the baby
– and sure enough so was Heather's.

The umbilical cord was slipped over Heather's head and finally she was born.
I remember driving home at 7 am Monday morning – so full of joy, so happy, so glad – that I began to sing:

“I will enter his gates with thanksgiving in my heart; I will enter his courts with praise.

I will say, this is the day the Lord has made, for he has made me glad. He has made me glad, He has made me glad, I will rejoice for God has made me glad.”

The same is true for Scripture. It is not meant to be merely read, it is to be experienced

– and in experiencing Scripture
– it touches us deeply, it transforms us – we are never the same again.
““Obey my voice and I will be your God, and you shall be my people . . .

The problem is that often we think that because Scripture is written, it is only meant to be read

But, Scripture is a living thing, it breathes, it is dynamic, it has a way of penetrating us and transforming our DNA.

This weekend we have been reflecting upon the biblical passages that have and are shaping us as a people of God. Scriptures
– which have been more than texts committed to memory
– but a living word which has touched us, shaped us, formed us, transformed us, created new life in us!

For that is what Scripture does.

It breathes God's presence, God's life in us
– it is more than word, it is the living presence of God
– Jesus
– it speaks to us in our life contexts.

But we do not always approach the Bible this way.

What are we to with the Bible?
Does it have a life outside of the church?

This is a question that is being raised as we seek to be the people of God in the 21st century.

In some sense, “in postmodern culture the Bible has no definite place, and citizens in a pluralistic, secular culture have trouble knowing what to make of it” (*Art of Reading Scripture*, xiv)

Ellen Davis and Richard Hays suggest that if postmodern people “. . . pay any attention to it at all, they treat it as a consumer product, one more therapeutic option for rootless selves engaged in an endless quest of self-invention and self-improvement”

But as they suggest, “this approach does not yield a very satisfactory reading of the Bible, for the Bible is not, in fact, about ‘self-help;’ it is about God's action [in human history] to rescue a lost and broken world” (*Art of Reading Scripture*, xiv).

But it is not only postmodern people outside of the church who struggle with the Bible, we who are inside the church, we who are the people of God – we also struggle with how to read it, interpret it, understand it, be guided by it.

Is the Bible authoritative for faith and practice?
We confess it is!
But in what way?

There are many questions
– which we cannot get to here this morning, but there is one thing that I am certain about
– **God does something to shape us in being the people of God in the world as we engage and experience God's Word together!**

And that is what we have been doing this weekend
– engaging it together, hearing it together, reading it together, experiencing it together
– by sharing what Scriptures and passages or themes of Scripture have been especially formative in our lives with God, in our learning to walk together with God and with one another.

Living in Scripture is a practice that I have been encouraging us to cultivate and foster in our lives, in community.

That is one of the reasons we try to discern at our baptisms what Scriptures we are to embody among one another in this community.

In some way
– we are to live in Scripture
– be shaped by Scripture

- live in its Story and Vision
- because it is God’s Story and Vision among us
- drawing us into what God is doing in the world to make all things new.

Reading and engaging Scripture is an *art*

- it is “a creative discipline that requires engagement and imagination, [which stands] in contrast to the Enlightenment’s ideal of detached objectivity” (*Art of Reading Scripture*, xv).

Not only is God an artist whose creativity appears on the canvas of the universe

- but being made in God’s image we are created to be artists as well
- and so we see God’s Words most clearly when we approach God speaking to us with an openness to the artistic eye with which the Spirit enables us to see.

And so, the word of the Lord comes to us in many ways

- even *in utero*, as Jeremiah attests
- “before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

Throughout the experiences of our lives

- as we develop deeper awareness of God’s activities in the world
- we begin to see that God is birthing God’s Word all around us
- in every situation, in people’s lives
- God is about birthing God’s Word and as it is birthed we witness the creation of Life!

And God is not only birthing God’s word all around us

- but also IN us.

God births God’s Word in us

- our speaking and actions become more and more integrated with God;

God births God’s Word in us

- Jesus takes up residence in us through the Spirit in our receiving Jesus into our lives

God births God’s Word in us

- as we reflect and mediate upon Scripture, as we have reflected upon the Scriptures that have given shape to our lives
- the Scriptures with which we have named one another at our baptisms
- these Scriptures have transformed our lives through which we are embraced by God and we embrace God’s presence.

God’s Word is being fulfilled in us each and every day.

Like Jesus, we are ones who live out the reality, demonstrate the reality of God’s Story and Vision in the world. We are then also, like Jesus, to express: “Today, this word is being fulfilled in your midst” for we are one who live our lives pointing to what God is doing – we are fulfillers of God’s Word in the world!

Through us, in our living in the midst of where we are called to live out our discipleship

- we are engaged in fulfilling God’s word in the world
- everyday is a day in which the Word of God is being fulfilled in our midst.

And as it is birthed in us, as it is fulfilled in us and through us, we cannot help but break forth in singing:

“He has made me glad, he has made me glad, I will rejoice for God has made me glad!”

God’s word is indeed a creative Word,

But it is also a word of dissonance, revealing in us what is not aligned with the purposes of God, what is more aligned with our preoccupation with ourselves.

When such dissonance in relation to God’s Word develops in us do we fight it or do we receive it as word that brings healing, realignment, and wholeness?

This weekend we have given attention to the Scriptures that have shaped us as persons in this community – we will take some time over the next few months to hear us telling stories of how these Scriptures have shaped us and are shaping us as a community.

And hopefully in the process we will discover 12 or so pivotal Scriptures which form us as a Mennonite community of God’s people.

These Scriptures are more than ones rooted in our minds

– they become a part of our DNA, forming us, shaping us, in which we seek to be ones who embody these texts, these words of life.

We live out these Scriptures before a watching world, so that the entire world may be transformed by the gracious working of God’s shalom, God’s grace and mercy.

So, let us keep on experiencing God’s Word: ingesting, embodying, speaking, living, acting the Word of God in the world

– a Word that indeed brings abundant life!