

# Sermons at St. Paul's

*A Wellspring of Spiritual Nourishment; A River of Service in Jesus' Name*

**January 24, 2010, The Third Sunday after The Epiphany  
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In the name of the one, holy and triune God. Amen.

In the last ten years a phrase has entered American vocabulary, made popular by the book-made-movie of the same name—A Perfect Storm. The storm in question was a spectacular nor'easter that occurred when three separate weather systems—none particularly powerful by itself—joined forces to create, well, the perfect storm.

Since then, the phrase “a perfect storm” has been used to describe any situation that is made significantly more intense or important by the combining of less remarkable circumstances.

I would like to suggest to you that the readings from Nehemiah, 1 Corinthians and Luke, combine on this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany to create a Perfect Storm. A perfect storm of faith, made up of worship, community and service.

When worship, community and service converge, the kingdom of God breaks into time and space and nothing can stop it.

In the lesson from Nehemiah we find the people of Israel gathered to hear the word of God read aloud. It has not been an easy time for Israel. Only recently have they returned from a long exile in Babylon, and they've returned to a burned-out temple and city in shambles. Ezra faces a demoralized people trying to rebuild broken walls and broken lives. They, indeed, have much to mourn and weep about.

But as Ezra begins to read from the Law of Moses, their weeping turns to worship; their mourning to shouts of joy. The suffering individuals who gather by the Water Gate are reconstituted into a people by their common story into the people of God. The reading and hearing of their sacred texts reminds them of the faithfulness of God. The God who promised Abraham land and descendents; the One who promised Jacob to go with him and protect him wherever he went; the One who heard the cries of the enslaved people and delivered them from the land of Egypt; the One who gave them the law to shepherd their life together; the One who whispered to Isaiah, “Do not fear, I have redeemed you, you are mine.”

Nehemiah describes how despair gives way to worship and how worship leads the people into the heart of joy—their joy in remembering the Faithful One of Israel, and finding that One in their midst again. *God's* joy that they have remembered and have become again the beloved community. Nehemiah describes mutual joy that overflows in feasting and then flows outward in service to the poor.

This is worship in its essence—the word of God proclaimed and interpreted shapes a life of joy and feasting and sharing. Joy and feasting and sharing shape a people. God’s people are recalled from exile and created again in the act of worship. This day, says Ezra, has become holy, the beginning of new life for the community. In a perfect storm of worship, community and service, the people once again find their strength—the strength of God.

If worship is the first component of that perfect storm, then community is the second. I don’t know if you could hear it in the reading, but the phrase “all the people” occurs 8 times in these 9 verses of Nehemiah. The scroll is read to *all the people*. Joy comes to *all the people*. God’s strength belongs to the community.

And it is *community* that is the subject of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. “You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

I wonder if the word “member” holds for us today the radical meaning that Paul intends. We find ourselves members of so many things these days. We are members of the work force, members of sports teams, members of student bodies, members of the cricket club, members of the library. Membership has come to mean our voluntary participation in an organization. We can choose to become members, we can choose to withdraw our membership.

But that’s not the meaning of “member” that Paul has in mind. The membership he has in mind is much less voluntary, and much more interconnected. He is thinking not of an organization, with many voluntary members, but of a single, living, organism. We may get closer to his meaning if we think of what it means to dismember a body. An organism so singular that to sever a part of it is to do violent damage to the whole. If one part is removed, the whole body is painfully wounded, its ability to function compromised. The church, the community of the baptized, is a living, breathing, single entity.

Paul’s is a radical claim about the way God’s redeeming work is carried out in the world—through a single, unified community that itself is the product of redemption—recreated, made whole and *one* in Christ Jesus. Salvation comes first to the community. And it is as a community—a single, empowered and enspirited body—that we carry on the work of salvation in the world. The spirit that joins us inseparably to the Body of Christ at our baptism also give us the gifts we need to carry out Christ’s healing work in the world. But the gifts are given to the gathered, baptized and baptizing community.

Today’s reading from Luke brings that point home for me. Today’s Gospel verses recount how Jesus begins his public ministry, and—did you notice?—it is in the context of the people of God gathered for worship. This is important I think. In the verses that precede today’s, Jesus has been baptized, and the Holy Spirit has descended upon him, and God has called him the Beloved Son. In short, he has been empowered by the Father and gifted by the Holy Spirit for ministry. And the first thing that happens is that he is tempted by the devil to use those gifts on his own, by himself, and for his own ends. And Jesus refuses.

Instead, he returns to the gathered people of God, and only then does he claim the anointing of the Spirit for the purposes of God’s kingdom. Only in the midst of the community does he

proclaim that the prophecies of God's kingdom are coming true in their presence. It is not just the presence of the Son of God, but the presence of the Son of God *with the people of God* that breathes God's reign into being. I think that Jesus is proclaiming to the people that it is God's presence in their midst that fulfills the promise of freedom, sight and good news.

And I think the same thing is still true today. As we gather for worship as a single, united community, Jesus comes among us. *Today* the Scriptures are fulfilled in our hearing. *Today* the kingdom of God comes into being in our midst. It is in community that, in the words of John Geyer's hymn:

1 We know that Christ is raised and dies no more.  
Embraced by death, he broke its fearful hold,  
and our despair he turned to blazing joy.  
Hallelujah!

2 We share by water in his saving death.  
Reborn, we share with him an Easter life,  
as living members of a living Christ.  
Hallelujah!

3 The Father's splendor clothes the Son with life.  
The Spirit's power shakes the church of God.  
Baptized, we live with God the Three in One.  
Hallelujah!

4 A new creation comes to life and grows  
as Christ's new body takes on flesh and blood.  
The universe restored and whole will sing:  
Hallelujah!

Worship. Community. And Jesus in today's gospel calls us—no less than those gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth—to the third element of the perfect storm: Service. If we believe that the kingdom is coming into being in our midst as a community gathered for worship, then we are also called to live kingdom lives. As Christ's Body, the Spirit of God that was upon him is also upon us and we, too, are anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. As in Nehemiah, we who find God in our gathered midst feast of fat things and fine wine, and we cannot help but carry that feast to those who do not yet share it.

Worship. Community. Service. Watch out! A perfect storm is in the making! *We* are the body of Christ, and individual members of it. *We* are recalled from exile—whether it be an exile of financial hardship, or of financial self-sufficiency; whether it be an exile of unemployment, or an exile of a job that demands too much of our time and soul; whether it be an exile of illness, or of loneliness, or of loss; whether it be the exile of a world devastated by earthquakes or by war or social injustice—we are recalled from exile to gather once more as the body of Christ. *We* are called once more to worship, to share our stories, to remember God's faithfulness, to have our

tears turned to joy. *We* are called once more to eat and drink at God's banquet table. *We* are sent once more from our worship and feasting to share God's love and goodness with others. *We* are anointed to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Worship. Community. Service. A perfect storm is brewing. God's kingdom is coming into being among us and nothing will be able to stop it. Thanks be to God. Amen.