

1/24/10 Epiphany 4c
Nehemiah 8:1-10
Luke 4:14-21
"Who Can Believe It?"

I have before me an article by Bill Nemitz from the Portland Press Herald, dated January 3rd of this year.

I think Nancy Lewis brought this to my attention.

As a pastor, to read it is a little disconcerting.

Bill's article details the rapidly disappearing desire and will to believe in New England, particularly in Maine.

The numbers are astonishing:

80% of Mainers don't go to church.

60% do not pray in any way.

For 58% of the population of Maine, religion has no importance whatsoever.

And finally, "a whopping 41 %" of the population does not believe in God.

On a scale of 1 to 46 of states surveyed,

Maine ranks in the bottom 3 of all the above categories, with New Hampshire and Vermont only ranking lower.

These are stunning numbers.

Before we go on a tirade about who is to blame - the media,

the liberal desire to deconstruct everything,

the conservative desire to never change,

the youth gone wild,

the laziness of Americans,

fill in the blank -

let's begin with looking inward.

It is always easy to make any situation about someone else.

It is much more difficult to focus on ourselves to see where we bear responsibility for the situation.

And we as the church in America bear much responsibility for the situation we have here.

Let's clarify what that situation is.

Very simply, 1000s of people a month and millions world-wide are abandoning the traditional, institutional church.

That abandonment creates an equal abandonment of the basic thought-structures of the culture, for better or worse.

When we align our spiritual power with the deeply embedded and sinful power structures of humanity -

namely governments and corporations -

we allow someone else to take responsibility for our beliefs and our spiritual life.

We become pawns of the powers and principalities
and are easily manipulated by their desires.

Every day as a pastor, some new "Christian" company sends me a catalog to buy their stuff which will provide a new, simple, more powerful path to

1) conversion and

2) getting people in the pews.

They charge a lot of money for these programs.

If the God of the Bible isn't our God,

then the God of the American Economy comes a close second.

And at the risk of making people angry,

what can we say about the complete alignment of conservative Christianity in America with the Republican party?

You want a massive fall-out and a wholesale rejection of faith? Align your political desires with your religion.

Failure begets failure.

Whenever the political party of choice fails, so will your faith.

And people rush for the doors,

seeking the next new, successful thing which will guarantee them the Great American Dream.

Don't think I am only attacking the conservatives here.

The liberal smack-down is next.

On the other side, if you spend enough time deconstructing what you believe,

you will find many more reasons not to believe than to believe. The liberal Christian agenda has been one of constant self-criticism.

We should always be looking to ourselves to find out how God wants us to change.

But since about 1780, Christian theologians and historians have worked very hard to demolish the central tenets of the Christian faith.

Nowadays, we rely on very flimsy ideas about history and theology to justify the rejection of the historical Jesus.

We rely on conspiracy theories to rewrite the background of early Christianity.

We hold them up as truth and then worship our idolatry of our own great minds.

Soon, we are left with, on the one hand, an undifferentiated faith in a nebulous God barely defined by a cool guy named Jesus;

and on the other hand,

a massive backlash of equally flimsy theology and historical understanding in the fundamentalist and conservative Christian movement.

Both avoid a deeper understanding of the nature of faith itself.

In other words, first and foremost,

you and I are to blame for the present situation of people flocking for the doors of the church into the great and apparent freedom of unbelief which is lurking "out there".

If it is any sore consolation,

Europe has been in this situation for about 3 decades longer than we have.

When I was in Wales in 1987, one of the most depressing sites I saw was a beautiful old 14th century church at the edge of some larger town.

It looked out over the valley,

which rolled with green hills,
ancient stone fences
and old cottages scattered among the fields.

An old graveyard with falling tombstones and dead trees sat behind the church.

The doors were double wooden doors with large wrought iron handles on them.

 Wrapped around the handles was a huge chain with a very large key lock on it.

 The chains were depressing.

 Even more so was the graffiti along one side of the building.

 I don't remember what it said, but the whole scene was a weird, dystopian vision of the state of the Christian church in Europe.

If it is any further consolation,

the numbers here in Maine now are almost identical to the numbers of Colonial America, where, until about 1840-60, the number of men outnumbered the women by almost 3 to 1.

 Anyone can tell you who is most likely to go to church in a marriage.

 It was true throughout Colonial America and is still true now.

So we have been here before as a culture and as a country.

In our reading from Nehemiah 8, the situation of Israel is almost identical, though for different reasons.

The people have just returned from exile in Babylonia.

While there, the great things of God in their history became but a distant memory.

 Not since the time of Joshua had the Torah been read. Faced with a far wealthier, far more powerful culture in the Babylonian Empire, it was only natural to be attracted to what worked.

 Money and power always work,

 so the gods worshiped in such a culture must also work. The chosen people of God flocked to these beliefs.

 It didn't take long at all to forget

 the God who frees,

 who redeems,

 who gives,

 who loves

 in the face of a God and culture who gives me stuff,

 even if I am a slave.

A few generations later, the Israelites are freed from captivity and return home to rebuild the Walls of Jerusalem they barely remember.

Nehemiah and Ezra head up this effort and take it very seriously. In the time away, the morality of the people has disintegrated. Their knowledge base has been destroyed.

The things that made the Israelites Israelites have all been stripped away.

Once everyone was settled, the people,

not the leaders of the community,

the people,

called for Ezra to bring out the Book of Moses, the Torah,

and on the first day of the seventh month, he started reading to them.

Those who had experience with the Torah, the equivalent of rabbis at the time,
*"helped the people to understand the law...So they read from the book, from the law of God,
with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading."* (Neh
8:8).

Can you imagine this today?

This would be something like me receiving a phone call at 3AM from a group of disaffected
20-somethings who have never been to church but had heard stories from their parents and
grandparents about when they used to pray and listen to some guy standing up front and
sing songs, all about some guy named Jesus and all about that God we hear about on TV
sometimes. They would call me up and say, *"We have heard you know something about the
Bible and there are about 30 of us sitting around talking. We have realized we have lost our
way and want you to come over and read to us from this Bible of which you speak."* This is
the only analogy I can think of for this story in Nehemiah.

What does it take for people to realize they need something which defines them?

Once we have become a part of that something, whether by birth as in Nehemiah's time, or by
choice, as it is for us now,

why do we resist that need so much?

I don't have good answers to either of those questions because, as a good American and an even
better Congregationalist,

I more often than not refuse to be a part of any group which would have me as a member.

But it is a good question.

In our unwillingness to be pinned down as, God forbid, a Christian, do we also eject the foundations
of the faith with that unwillingness?

Having been through this process of rejection and reclamation myself, I think it is part of how we
come to accept who we are more deeply.

But that acceptance requires being open to the possibilities inherent in a relationship with God.

In Nehemiah's reading, the will of God was fulfilled in the reading with and for the people of God,
who literally craved the hearing of it.

An inversion of the Nehemiah story takes place in our Gospel story. In Luke 4, Jesus has come to
the synagogue *"as was his custom"*.

He stood up to read the Scripture from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. All this is traditional
practice in the synagogue - standing for the reading of Scripture and sitting for receiving and
hearing the teaching.

Jesus reads a combination of Isaiah 61 and 42, saying,

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

Let's stop for a minute.

What is good news to the poor?

Isn't it whatever leads to a sense of wholeness and completeness in one's life?

It could be food for the hungry.

It could be shelter for the homeless.

It could be protection from abuse and maltreatment.

It could be meaningful work for the underemployed and misemployed.

It could be spiritual healing from the destruction caused by manipulative and unscrupulous religious leaders.

Does our definition of what poor means allow us to keep our distance from the experience of the poor so we don't need to identify with them?

How can we bring good news to what we do not or will not understand?

What does it mean to believe there is good news for the poor?

Then Jesus says,

*"He has sent me to proclaim
the release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind."*

I ask the same question here.

What is a release from captivity

and what is the recovery of sight?

I remember when I first walked into a prison to do ministry behind bars. There is something deeply troubling about walking through the sliding iron doors of the entrance, but no one is more thankful than a young man behind bars who has been visited by someone who cares about his spiritual life.

Are we willing to go behind the bars to find out what release from captivity really means?

Are prisons only for people who have done wrong in our society, or is prison a reflection of us?

Do we have any idea where we are blind,

or have we been in the dark so long we take the dark to be the light of sight?

Can we believe liberation is possible for all of us?

Then Jesus says,

*"to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

What would happen tomorrow if all the banks

and the CEOs of financial institutions were suddenly overcome and they decided to cancel the debt record of everyone?

This is something like what the year of the Lord's favor is all about.

Are we willing to even entertain such a spectacular act? The year of the Lord's favor also returned land to those who had to sell it to overlords.

It meant the return of slaves to their family of origin.

It meant all that had been taken as collateral was returned to the rightful owner.

No questions asked.

No arguments.

It was after all the will of God such a thing should occur.

This is truly amazing stuff to believe.

Then Jesus sits down and tells the synagogue,

who are alert and thoroughly intrigued with the carpenter's son,

" Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today.

Right now.

In this church.

Did you hear it?

Because you,
Rockland Congregational Church,
have heard this,
it is now fulfilled!
Can you believe it?

This brings us back to our article from Bill Nemitz about unbelief and loss of faith.

Why do people not believe anymore?

What are the reasons for belief and unbelief?

The reasons for belief and unbelief are often identical. The biggest reason to believe and the best reason not to believe, I think, is the existence of suffering and pain in the world.

When faced with unrelenting evil in the form of warfare,

genocide,

inequity,

slavery,

disease,

murder,

rape,

abuse,

poverty -

whatever it is

we are faced with a great choice:

to do something

or to do nothing.

If I do something, by what standard do I choose to act?

We can look to heaven and plead with God as to why such a thing should occur,

and the Psalms are full of such outcries,

and then step in to pull the person

out of the wreckage,

out of the destruction,

out of the addiction,

out of the suffering

they are experiencing.

If I choose to do nothing, why?

We can do nothing and leave each person to their own suffering with equal Biblical justification.

Both approaches can rely on the presence of God

or the rejection of God.

No one can make the choice for you.

In the end, though, I think there are only two choices -
God or nothing.

The other avenue to unbelief, I think,
is to give everyone what they want.
Flood our senses with stuff, until,
if we have any sort of religion,
we can attribute all our stuff to either the God we worship,
like the captivated Israelites in Babylon,
or to our own power and ability.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the Haiti earthquake is the expression of
prayer and belief it elicits from the people in the midst of it down there.

Why does suffering and lack elicit belief and prayer,
but our relative comfort and abundance does not?
And then, if you combine unrelenting self-absorption with really poor thinking skills,
you not only get unbelief,
you get truly weird beliefs.

This reminds me of a GK Chesterton quote.

He is one of my favorite writers, not because I agree with everything he says, but because
of his willingness to say what he has to say.

Anyway, one quote I do agree with is

*"It is not that when one stops believing in God,
one believes in nothing.
It is rather that one is now willing to believe anything."*

Now I will be the first to say Christianity has some pretty strange beliefs and understandings
about the universe and our spiritual reality,
but Christianity also forces us to look outside ourselves constantly
and at the same time demand constant reasoning
and critical examination of why we believe what we believe.

"Who do you say that I am" is not just a question Jesus asks Peter;
it is a question constantly posed to each and every one of us,
Christian or not.

But here is the thing. Jesus Christ calls us to be the ones who fulfill the Scriptures by our hearing
of it.

Yeah, no one else believes what you believe.

Yeah, people are leaving the church in droves.

But what does Jesus call us to?

To clothe the naked,
feed the poor,
visit the prisoner,
forgive the sinner,
reach into the suffering of the world
and call forth the God

who frees,
who clothes,
who makes whole
and who saves all of us.

Jesus was willing to die for it.

And in his dying and resurrecting,

he has told us "*wherever two or three are gathered, I will be with you.*"

Do we really believe that statement?

We do in fact have the ability to hear and act upon the fulfillment of scripture through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Can you hear it?

It is almost unbelievable, isn't it?

Can you believe it?