

Annual Address
Epiphany 3C
The Rev. Emily Richards
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The Moment of Now

The hometown boy gets up in the synagogue to read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. A typical practice in ancient Jewish life. Jesus had been gaining a reputation for his preaching outside of the confines of the traditional religious structures. An atypical practice in ancient Jewish life. His neighbors couldn't wait to hear what he had to say among them in the synagogue. Would he speak about their struggles as an oppressed people living in an occupied land? Their ancestors' hopes and dreams, or their own long-awaited desire for a Messiah to come and save them? Would he speak about himself and his ministry that was getting a lot of attention? What would the son of Joseph and Mary say to them?

Jesus rolled up the scroll and handed it back to the attendant. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." His mic' drop moment. You can hear the collective sucking in of air by all those present. Shock. Confusion. The Spirit of the Lord is HERE? Through you the poor hear good news, the prisoners are being released, the blind see, and the oppressed receive justice? This, here among us, is the year of Lord's favor? Not yesterday. Not tomorrow. Jesus proclaims. But, TODAY. The Kingdom of God has come.

On Annual Meeting Sunday, it is my usual practice to reflect on where we've been as a community of faith and where I think we may need to go. Inspired by Luke's story this morning I have decided instead to focus on who we are right NOW. Not who we were yesterday or even who we wish to be tomorrow. To celebrate how God is working among us. God's Kingdom in this place. In this very moment.

Diana Butler Bass, an Episcopal lay woman has been spending much time and energy these days grappling with understanding who the Church is today; and helping communities like ours join her in this holy work. In reflecting on this particular story, she writes, "Faith communities are often consumed with memories of the past and hopes for the future. Speaking of the past may take a form of maintaining buildings and structures, of teaching ancient texts, and passing on patterns of life and values from ancestors. Speaking of the future is often wrapped up in hopes for salvation, desires for answered prayers, for the children to hold onto faith or 'come back to church.' Both past

and future are important to vibrant communities; healthy and life-giving practices of honoring our ancestors and embracing a hopeful future.

But both of them have their shadow sides. Overemphasizing the past results in nostalgia--the belief that the past is better than either the present or the future--a disposition that is steeped in grief and fear. Overemphasizing the future--the belief that all that matters is that which is to come--often results in doubt and anxiety. A recent survey discovered that the majority of churchgoers in the United States express high levels of both nostalgia and anxiety. In particular, mainline congregations are caught between valorizing the good old days and a deepening sense of desolation that some promised future will never arrive.

As a result, today is lost. Today is merely a stage upon which we mourn the loss of past and fear what we cannot imagine. But 'today' is a deeply dangerous spiritual reality--because today insists that we lay aside both our memories and our dreams to embrace fully the moment of now. The past romanticizes the work of our ancestors; the future scans the horizons of our descendants and depends upon them to fix everything. But "today" places *us* in the midst of the sacred drama, reminding us that we are actors and agents in God's desire for the world. "Today" is the most radical thing Jesus ever said."

Last Sunday I led a communion service at Abington Hospital's Behavioral Unit--what used to be called the psychiatric ward. Once a month clergy and laity from different local Episcopal churches join patients and staff in sharing God's word and sacrament together. There I was among a group of people I knew I'd probably never encounter again who shared their feelings of isolation, unworthiness and pain more freely with me than I ever could with complete strangers. Women and men who hungered for belonging, and a sense of belovedness; and spoke about their longing with remarkable candor. And as we broke bread together, bore witness to one another's stories and prayed with urgency, we were placed in the very heart of the sacred drama, embracing the moment of Now. I left that holy circle reminded that this is what church is all about and why it matters. Why it matters in a nation and in a world where many are experiencing an increased sense of disconnection.

I have a tendency to get caught up in the minutia of my work as your priest that I can lose sight of the beauty and the grace found in the moment of NOW. I can linger too much in what was or what should be that I overlook what God is actually doing. Today. Among a group of complete strangers. Among you and me. When we gather around our holy circle and receive the bread of life the Kingdom of God has come. When we march in Philadelphia for a safer and more just world and exchange the Peace with a

Muslim neighbor at an Interfaith service, the Kingdom of God has come. When we feast on good food and fellowship with a friend at the Lunch Club and engage in deep conversation with a youth at Teen Time the Kingdom of God has come. And when we spend a cold Thanksgiving morning with our homeless neighbors or travel as far as North Dakota to learn about ourselves and our sisters and brothers at Standing Rock, the Kingdom of God has come among us.

One of our newest members, Katie Kenney has a blog where she writes delightfully about her life. Her Christmas post was about St. Peter's and what this community means to her. She gave me permission to share a little of it with you this morning. She writes, "My church describes itself as 'a community of people rooted in God's love, growing through God's grace, and reaching out to all'. That's a typical kind of mission statement. The unique part? This is surely a mission statement that my church takes to heart. It's in the way that they behave that lets me know their convictions. They lead by example. We **welcome** everyone by talking to them and making them feel comfortable. We take the word of God seriously by the way we **listen** to the readings and talk about them. We are raising our kids to be good humans by the way we **respect** them and make them an enormous part of our worship. We care about the wider community by the way we **reach out** to help them in donations and friendship. We never take ourselves too seriously by the way we **joke** around, by the way we just undertake these tasks to **serve God** the best we can. Sometimes I take church for granted, but especially in this Christmas season, I wanted to acknowledge what an amazing place I get to be a part of!"

Jesus' invitation for us as we gather to engage in the holy and hard work of the church, tackling all the various facets of our common life is to dwell in the knowledge that this is an amazing community, here and now. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and also upon you, Jesus declares, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Today this promise has been fulfilled in your hearing. All that we are and all that we need, we have right here. Among us. Today. Amen.