

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time • Year C

January 26, 2025

Readings

Neh 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10

Ps 19:8, 9, 10, 15

1 Cor 12:12-30 *or* 1 Cor 12:12-14, 27

Lk 1:1-4; 4:14-21

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At the age of six, a question which perplexed me was: Why aren't there more purple cars? I had seen a purple Volkswagen Beetle on the road, and it looked cool, and, frankly, kind of delicious. I think that was at the heart of the puzzle. Purple things all taste good – grape soda, grape popsicles, grape salt water taffy. So why not buy a “grape car”?

I asked my Mom. She said that purple was a nice color for some things, but it didn't look good on cars. “Why not?” She looked down at me for several seconds, then said, “You won't understand until you're older.” My mother said this a lot. Apparently, if you are standing in line at Sears, and ask your mother in a loud voice where babies come from, you have to hear “You won't understand until you grow up” for the rest of your childhood. This answer always made me mad, which is why I think I remember it. I told her I *was* old enough to understand, but she wouldn't budge, and I was to ponder the mystery of purple cars.

Years later, a dark purple convertible drove past our house, and it all came back to me, and I thought, “Oh, *that's* why there aren't more purple cars. Because they're ugly.” (If you have a purple car, I apologize.) There was no way a six-year-old could have the experience and the taste to understand why it was good for water ice to be purple but bad for cars. My mother was absolutely right: I couldn't understand until I was older.

Which brings us to this morning's Gospel. Jesus is home, in the synagogue of his youth, surrounded by people who knew him as a child and a teenager and a young man. He opens the Scriptures and reads out a passage from the prophet Isaiah which everyone had heard many times: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." Jesus finishes, sits down, pauses, makes sure he has everyone's attention, and then lowers the boom: "Today this Scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."

I am the one Isaiah is talking about.

I am the one sent by God to proclaim the good news.

In effect, Jesus says to the crowd, "When you were younger, you thought you knew what this passage meant. You heard it proclaimed and had it explained and thought you understood. But you didn't. You couldn't. You thought it was speaking of someone from far away, another great prophet like Isaiah or Jeremiah. You never imagined that it referred to one of your neighbors, that the Christ would be one of your own. But here I am. Now you are ready to understand."

Next week, we will hear that, indeed, the crowd *doesn't* understand, and they are not happy. They don't like a guy from the neighborhood telling them how to interpret Scripture. They don't care for a local boy with delusions of grandeur.

Yet, God does the same thing with us. He tells us things when we're younger that we can't possibly understand, not fully. Often we grasp what God really means only through mistakes and hardship.

From our youngest days, we have heard the parables of the shepherd going after the lost sheep and the return of the prodigal son. But only as we grew older, and found ourselves straying from the right path, or trying to teach out to a wandering child, brother, or sister, only then did we see that Jesus was talking about us.

From our childhood we have heard the stories of Jesus curing the blind, pulling Peter from beneath the waves, driving out demons, and feeding thousands with bread and fish and his words of new hope. But only as we grew up and felt the blindness of our own sin, found ourselves drowning in the responsibility of work and home and family, beset by demons of addiction and lust, our spirit hungry for things that we were sure would make us happy but did not – only then did we realize that Jesus was talking to us, calling us to accept his rescue, to welcome his healing, to feast on his mercy.

As children, we looked forward to the day we could receive communion. We knew it was Jesus, knew it was the greatest gift God has given us. But what we did not understand is the responsibility that comes with this gift: To eat what Christ gives, and then offer food to others; to receive Christ's forgiveness, and then show mercy; to take the Lord of heaven and earth into our bodies, and then to live differently: to shun fornication, to forego revenge, to care for the poor, and to give up living as if this world were the stuff of lasting joy and true fulfillment.

Why don't they make more purple cars? Because most people don't think they look good. Why did the people of Nazareth have a hard time accepting Jesus? Because he was too close to them. Why does Christ come to us on this altar again and again? So that we will understand now what we didn't understand at the start: the Eucharist is food for the servants of God, to give us strength to do nothing less than imitate the care and compassion of Jesus Christ. It takes a lifetime and more to understand what that really means.