

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Luke 4:14-21

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

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TAKING GOD AT FAITH VALUE

Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." *Luke 4:21*

After Jesus had been baptized in the Jordan by his cousin, John the Baptist, he went into the wilderness of Judea to let himself be tested and formed into the person God and his ministry demanded of him. The desert was a crucible of refining, suffering in blistering heat so as to conform his every fiber to God's intention for him. Once his soul had rejected the world's enticements (the three famous temptations to self indulgence, power, and the grandstanding of personal gifts ("Throw yourself from the pinnacle of the temple," said the tempter, "and the angels will save you.") he was completely *aligned* with and conformed to God.

Personal alignment means effectively to conform in conduct and intention to another. Alignment is the one thing God asks of each Christian. When Jesus called his many disciples he asked each to align him or herself to him. Actually he put it still more simply: "Follow me." For the twelve, who seem barely to know Jesus (none of them came from his home town), it took a great deal of trust and courage to follow, leaving family, income and vocations. Something in his charismatic aura led them to take him at *faith value*, to be willing to be shaped by him.

When I came out of the Royal Air Force in 1967, I went to work for British Aircraft Corporation in my hometown, building aircraft airframes for military airplanes. I was astonished to discover that the sheet metal we used for the airframe was surprisingly easy to shape. It was so malleable, bendable. We could hammer it with leather mallets over laminated forms and templates, often in fairly extreme configurations to create an engine intake manifold, the leading edge contour for a wing, or a stabilizer fin. Yet this was otherwise extremely tough material. It had to be to withstand the severe conditions of supersonic flight and devilishly stressful airborne maneuvers. I learned that, to be so pliable the sheet metal had gone through a rigorous process called annealing. When metal is annealed it is heated to a

high temperature then allowed to cool slowly over a precise time. In doing so the molecules in the material rearrange themselves into straight lines, such that the material becomes much more structurally uniform and workable. Annealing realigns the stress points and crystalline aberrations that otherwise might fracture when stressed. The nature or composition of the material had not changed, just its internal order, like red hot steel that's tempered or hardened by plunging into cold water, forming something as resilient yet pliable as the multiple folds of a samurai sword.

When Jesus came away from the wilderness and his excruciating experience of aligning or annealing himself to God, he was not a different person, but one differently—more enduringly, more completely formed within. It is in this way that Luke can speak of him coming to his ministry in Galilee “filled with the power of the Spirit” (Luke 4:14).

When Jesus went back to his home town of Nazareth, one gets the impression that he has been away for a long time. The people recognize him, of course, as Joseph (now deceased) and Mary's son. But they are astonished that he now exudes this wisdom and presence previously unfamiliar to them. He has changed. They like what they see and hear—at first (that will change abruptly in the very next passage). For now they are rather “chuffed,” as the British say, that he's turned out so well. They're pleased with themselves—they must have done something right raising him. But it stops there. They don't take him at face value or align themselves with his spirit. When, after reading the lesson from Isaiah, he says to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” it passes over their heads like a shooting star while watching T.V in the den.

A minister colleague of Bishop Willimon by the name of Dennis tells the story of a Sunday morning when this experience of Scripture took on a profound meaning in his congregation.

A family in the church had adopted a child from Mother Theresa's orphanage in Calcutta. The child, a little girl, was severely disabled, born with paralyzed legs and other severely disabling problems, such that for the first five years of her life she had been raised in a box that the Sisters of Mercy, making the best of their meager resources, had fashioned into a crib.

When her new family brought the little girl home, they immediately sought medical help for her, and the result was a series of major surgeries that happened over the next several years. The members of the congregation prayed throughout this time for the child to be restored to health. When the child was about twelve, and the worst of the surgeries were completed, the family realized that they had never had their new child baptized. So they met with Pastor Dennis and set a date for the baptism.

However, on the appointed Sunday, the family, caught up in frantic last minute preparations for the service, was running a few minutes behind and arrived late for worship. When they came into the sanctuary, Dennis was already reading the scripture lessons. Because of the baptism they needed to get to the front pew, so they started down the aisle. Their daughter, dressed in her beautiful baptism dress and smiling radiantly, led the way, walking on her crutches. It was the first time the congregation had seen her walk on her own strength. The gospel Scripture on that Sunday was from Matthew 11:2-5, Jesus speaking to the disciples of John the Baptist, who had come to him from John asking, “Are you the one who is to come [that is, the promised Messiah of God], or should we look for another?” Jesus reply is, of course, “Go and tell John what you hear and see.”

As the little girl walked down the aisle for all to see, the crutches clacking their metallic cadence, Dennis continued reading, fighting back the emotion, “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk . . . and the poor have good news brought to them.” Then, as this newly healed and restored child of God sat down in the front pew, beaming with her sunburst pride, Dennis looked at the congregation and said, “Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

As Dennis tells the story, one feels that his congregation has indeed been a part of that family’s journey, they have been aligned to God and the family. The same is so often true at St. John’s. The discreet prayerfulness of so many hidden intercessory ministries, especially among the Wednesday Companions in Prayer, and the faithful Spiritual Companions. The frequent acts of human kindness toward others in their hard times. Little notes and cards and unanticipated telephone calls simply to check up on you and your household. The way sometimes complete strangers care for our children year after year in Sunday School. And other strangers, to many of us, work long hours on Session and Deacons, Trustees and Women’s Fellowship. The way our small Peace and Social Justice group constantly provokes our awareness of urgent issues in life and culture. The way meals appear at the back door in hard times. Or the homebound get visits from lay Pastoral caregivers. These are what I mean by taking God at faith value.

If you feel less connected than you might, perhaps more attracted to St. John’s on face value than on faith value, even a bit bemused, like the villagers in the Nazareth’s synagogue at Jesus’ words. If you feel biblically out on a limb, or your unused to church culture, and want to connect more, there are so many ways to grow in fellowship and understanding—check the bulletin or our splendid web pages, or ask. we’re not unusual in being eager to talk about ourselves.

If you've been asked to serve and haven't responded yet, or responded with a "Thanks, but not just now," consider the challenge of Rabbi Hillel, a contemporary of the young Jesus, one of the stellar luminaries of the Jewish tradition: "If not me, why? If not now, when?"

Amen.