

Homily – Now Is Sacred

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I took part of the week off after Christmas to rest. I spent part of that restful time reorganizing our home library. It is not organized in any way that would be recognizable. Things are often grouped in ways that only make sense to me. For example, I grouped all the unread and partially read books together. This was rather eye opening for I have between 250 and 300 unread or partially read books. I read a lot, and I buy a lot of books. I decided to start the year without buying new books. Instead, I am going to work through the books I already have. I don't know if this resolution will last weeks or months, but for a while I will focus on what I already have.

In today's Gospel lesson we heard Jesus reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, and at the end of the reading he said "He sent me... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And, after he sat down Jesus told those gathered that day "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." In other words, he told them that that very present moment was the year of the Lord's favor.

How would you react today, if you were told this is the year of the Lord's favor. This year, 2022, is going to be one of the best. Get ready for some really good stuff. How would you react? My reaction would be one of skepticism. I'll believe it when I see it. The last two years have such a roller coaster ride, that I don't think I would be alone in my skepticism. Omicron is overwhelming the planet. Hospitals are reaching capacity. Physicians and nurses are exhausted. National and local economies are flailing. And, the Covid death toll continues to rise. And this is before we mention any of the other challenges facing us. Wars and threats of wars. Violence of all stripes. The catastrophic effects of climate change. The long shadow of racial injustice. Alarming breakdowns in civility and basic kindness. Rising epidemics of anxiety, depression, addiction, and despair. Who on earth would reasonably call our current moment holy, or favored of God?

But, that is what Jesus tells his listeners. And, by extension he is telling us the same things. Jesus invites us to attend to now. There is sacredness in the present moment. Do you see it? Do you feel it? The year 2022 is a sacred time. Today shimmers with the presence, the favor, and the blessings of God. Whether you know it or not, whether you see it or not, God is present and showering us with blessings. Now is the year of God's favor, so what are you going to do about it?

Now all of this helps me realize how reluctant I am at times to embrace the holiness of "today." Perhaps like some of you, I have spent the past two years living "on hold."

Deferring and deflecting, as if the days we live in right now don't count as "real life." I tell myself that real life will resume after the pandemic. Real life will resume when church services go back to being in-person. And, when we can celebrate the Eucharist with bread AND wine. And, when we put away our masks for good. Or, real life will start when we get some sort of handle on climate change, teen depression, and sectarian violence. We have a lot of these qualifications about when real life will begin again. But remember, before Covid, we had lots of qualifications as well. Real life will begin when I get my dream job, or when my home remodel is done, or when the kids are settled and married. We have always been a people who put life on hold and dream of the past or ruminate about the future. However, throughout the centuries the mystics and sages have known a truth that is taught to us again today by Jesus. Real life is now. We already have enough to live into the blessings that we have from God. We have enough and don't need to wait.

And, if we live in the present with what we have, then we can expect two things to happen. First, we can expect the calming of many of our fears and anxieties. And second, we can expect to be more aware of the presence of God in our lives. Don't these sound like things you want in your life and in the lives of your loved ones?

We are a society and people that is plagued by anxiety and fear. Like the disciples two thousand years ago, we live our lives shaped and controlled by our fears and anxieties about money and health and status and power. Imagine what it would be like give up these fears and anxieties and to live in a state of joy. The things you spend so much time on, all this work you do might not seem as important. We get too concerned about who is the greatest and not concerned enough about spending time with the children that surround us. The loving relationships we have, the universe around us, we take these things for granted. Why can't we see the blessings that surround us? Do we really need to face death before we will pay attention to each moment? Why do we let anxiety fuel our engines, driving us to think always of the "shoulds" and the "what ifs?" Why does it always seem as though we are running on a treadmill?

Are we that afraid to stand still? When we become lost in the memories of the past or pre-occupations about the future, we forget the power of paying attention and how, without attention, we live on the surface, and our lives lack joy. In any discussion about why we avoid living in the present or seeing what is really before us, it is important to face the fact that sometimes, what is before us seems unbearable. Sometimes we are in so much pain that even when we do look around us, we can't see anything but the pain. Sometimes great things, even unexpected miracles, can be standing right in front of us but we can't see them.

And that is the second benefit of living in the present. When we live in the here and now, we start to notice the eternal presence of God. Through the enormity of time and space, God is always with us. God is with us in the good times and the bad times. God is with us in the big things and God is with us in the small things.

Living in the present means seeing without the lens of panic or fear so that we can pay attention to the miracles that are right in front of us. It is about accepting what is. It is knowing that Jesus has assured us of a future. It is about remembering but not continuously reliving the high school days. It is about letting go of all the fretting when we are trying to decide to sell the house or not. It is about learning how to die so that we can learn how to live. When we are present, we are more alive, and we see we are held in the eternal embrace of God.

Now, before I finish today, I want to make the connection between living in the present and living with what we already have. For you see, I am firmly convinced that we are blessed by God in ways that we know and in ways that we don't know. God blesses, and blesses, and blesses. We don't need to wait for a new blessings, and what we already have from God is more than sufficient.

Last year I was talking to a wise person at our St. Barnabas Thrift Shop. There are many benefits to this ministry and we were focused on recycling. We help folks recycle things they no longer need. We all put a lot into the landfill each year, and recycling is not only important for plastic and glass. It is also important that household goods and clothing find a new home. This wise person at the Thrift Shop pointed out two things to me. First, many people can't trash their worn out treasures. Fond memories about an object may keep it piled in the closet, and our homes just fill with more and more stuff. However, when we receive donation at the Thrift Shop we cull through things and pitch those things that are too worn out. So part of our ministry is to throw things away when a person can't throw it away themselves. The second thing this wise person reminded me is that we can't just keep recycling more and more stuff. We actually have to stop buying all this stuff. We have to be satisfied with the things that are already in our closets and cupboards. I know this is counter to our capitalistic, consuming society, but that is what we need to do. We need to stop buying, live in the now, and live with what we already have.

And, I need to curtail my buying of books. We will see how long I can go with this resolution. I have a lot of good unread books on my bookshelves, and perhaps I even need to start going to the public library. Will I do that at some point in the future when real life starts again, or will I do it now? Live in the now, live with what you already have, and go to the library.