

### Epiphany 3, Year C

- “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.”
- In seminary, had a spiritual director who told me that sometimes God’s work is bringing order out of chaos
- He told me this, of course, in response to a story that I had just told him about one of my children – but I think there’s something to it – may not be universally true – sometimes God’s ways feel pretty chaotic to us
- Something to the idea that God works to bring order out of chaos – at creation God separated the chaotic, primordial waters from the land, and then gave order to the living creatures and the pattern of life
- And as creation continues along, eventually God gives humanity the law – set of rules to guide us, some semblance of order to attempt to govern our all too human chaos
- Of course, if you study ancient Israelite history, you know that the Israelites eventually misplaced the law during the period of time known as the Babylonian captivity or Babylonian exile – the time after Jerusalem was taken over and the Temple destroyed by the Babylonian empire, when a great many of the Jewish people were forced to relocate to Babylon
- That’s important only because it sets the stage for our Old Testament reading this morning – this moment when the people of Israel gather together in the public square around Ezra and ask him to read from the law
- Ezra, in case you’re not familiar with this slightly obscure figure who I must say has a rather fantastic name, is the scribe and priest who thankfully finds the law again once the Jewish people are allowed to return to Jerusalem and the temple is, rather incredibly, rebuilt, thanks to an edict issued by Cyrus, the king of Babylon
- When he himself returns from Babylon, Ezra finds his fellow Jewish people in something of chaos – not observing the law at all – and so calls them to return to the way of the Lord, to follow God’s law once again – he attempts to bring order – encourages the people to hold themselves accountable for what they should be doing, for God
- We don’t always love the law, love rules – in fact, more often than not we tend to either resent them or imagine they don’t apply to us (although remarkably, rules do seem always to apply to other people), or we imagine that we can live without them
- It is perhaps strange to our ears to hear the Psalmist sing to God, “The law of the Lord is

perfect and revives the soul” – not something we often say about the law, about rules

- Or again, “The statutes of the Lord are just and rejoice the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear and gives light to the eyes.”
- There is a joy in being told what to do that is likely somewhat foreign to us – maybe foreign to Ezra’s time, too
- Sure, when Ezra so much as opens the book of the law to read to the people, the people stand up
- But Nehemiah and Ezra have to tell the people not to weep on the holy day of God, because so many people were mourning, were weeping to hear the law of God read
- Maybe sometimes we prefer the cover of chaos – because order offers no place for our consciences to hide
- But the law that the Psalmist describes as “perfect” and says “rejoices the heart,” and “gives light to the eyes” is more than just a set of burdensome rules to follow – they’re a way of becoming the people that God created us to be
- That’s why Ezra calls the people to return to God’s law, and to be joyful doing so – he knows the light and life it can bring when we live our lives in a way we know is pleasing to God, when we know what we’re doing is right
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- Paul, too, in this, one of my favorite parts of his first letter to Corinth, says something that could also be viewed in terms of bringing order out of chaos – he says that we the Church are, collectively, the Body of Christ
- One of the most enduring, most fundamental images for what it means to be a Christian – members of the one body – and he says that we each have a function to perform, we each have different gifts, each have a different role in service of the whole
- In other words, we don’t have the option of electing to remain in our own individual chaos – we are obligated, for Christ’s sake, to work for the sake of God’s order, for the benefit of God’s whole
- Instead of pursuing our own ends, instead of doing whatever we would like, Paul tells us, we need to think about God’s will for the world, and how we and our gifts fit into that vision, that dream of God’s
- Finally, we had that one other reading, of the Gospel, where we did just what the people did at the reading of the law all those centuries ago
- As most of you know, I was at a Christian formation conference in Indianapolis this past

week, and one of the people we heard from was a priest named Juan Oliver, the current custodian of the Book of Common Prayer, who talked about our liturgy and the way it shapes us to proclaim the Good News to the world

- And one of the things he said in his remarks that stuck with me was that it's no coincidence that the congregation stands and turns toward the deacon (that person who in their role for the sake of the Body stands at the intersection of the Church and the world) – it is no coincidence that we turn toward that person when the Gospel is read
- He also went on to say that “liturgy and ritual aren't just vehicles for ideas – our liturgy doesn't present a theology for us to agree with, but it conditions our body to feel reverence, respect, awe – it literally incarnates the ideas in our physical being.”
- Meaning our liturgy is meant to bring a bit of God's order to the chaos of our bodily existence
- And when we did that today, we heard this moment from early in Luke's Gospel – moment right before Jesus really and truly begins his earthly ministry
- Before he does, he reads this passage of Scripture in the synagogue
- And so this moment serves as an announcement of sorts – if ever you could say that Jesus delivered a mission statement for his earthly ministry, this would be the moment
- And what passage does Jesus read to announce his mission to the world?
- “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”
- Some of you who came to the adult forum back in the fall may remember us talking about something called a Rule of Life – a laying out of the expectations we have for ourselves, a plan we have to live out our faith – to live out our faith, you could say, according to God's order, rather than our own individual chaos
- This moment, when Jesus reads this passage as if to herald what he's about is almost like Jesus laying out his Rule of Life – these are the things he expects to do in order to live out the example of God's plan
- So if you want to know the order that God is bringing to the chaos of the world as we know it, you can find it right here – Good News to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight, and freedom, and proclamation of the Lord's favor
- In that example of a Rule of Life we studied back in the fall, the one from our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry called The Way of Love – the first component of that rule of life is

'turn' – the idea of discernment, of listening for God's voice, of orienting our lives toward God and toward God's will for us – and being willing to do so continually – to listen for the ways in which we might have slipped into a little bit of chaos, perhaps, or even how the order that was working for us recently has ceased to work as well, and how we need to change somewhat

- In just a short while we will be having our Annual Meeting – not necessarily everyone's idea of excitement – and I've heard people complain in the past that the business aspects of such a meeting don't always feel very godly
- But our Annual meeting is, in some ways, equal parts evaluation and Rule of Life – thinking back on how we've done over the past year, laying out the future that we think God has in store for us this coming year
- It is our way, for this time and in this place, of trying to join in God's work – to bring a little bit of order to the chaos that our communal life can sometimes be – to discern the ways we can continue to turn even more towards God
- And so, as we engage in this important work, we will keep asking: where have we seen God at work in this community over the past year?
- Where do we think God is calling us to grow, and in what fields are we called to labor in the coming year?
- What is God calling us to do and to be?
- Because we all have our part to play in this community of Grace – we all, individually and collectively, have our role to fill for the benefit of the Body of Christ and for the sake of the world
- I can't wait to see where God takes us next