

“Today!”

Nehemiah 8, Luke 4: 14-21

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We no longer know Christ according to the flesh, that is, in the manner of the past. Following Jesus is the adventure of my freedom as a child of God and therefore a very risky adventure. -- Claude Geffre'

In the year 1884, an English Schoolmaster, Edwin Abbot published a novella about a place called Flatland. Flatland is a fictional two-dimensional world. If you want to get a sense of Flatland, think of placing a penny on the middle of a glass table. Lean over it, look down upon it. It will appear a circle. But now, drawing back to the edge of the table, gradually lower your eye until you are just looking at the edge: It will look, as far as you can see, flat. A straight line.

Imagine a planet, world, a whole existence like that: Completely flat. Imagine a whole world: flat. Two dimensions: length and breadth. No one in Flatland is longer than 12 inches. The lowest classes of men are triangles with two equal sides. The Middle Class are Equilateral triangles. Gentlemen are squares. Nobility are Hexagons. Women are straight lines.

Flatland is about this world of 2 dimensional beings All of a sudden Encountering and discovering a 3rd dimension. Long, wide now encounters: volume. Depth. It blows their little flat minds.

Published in 1884. Not much press, until Einstein's Theory of Relativity brought up the possibility of a 4th dimension, and then people were called to think again. "Wow. What if there could be another dimension?" 123 years after it was first published, they made a movie about it.

It's is a simply, winsome, and yet provocative story that makes us think about the thinness of our lives. The two-dimensionality. The thinness of self-indulgence. Thin commitments. Thin awareness. Thinness of self-sufficiency

Thin identity of being primarily consumers: consumed by our stuff. Flattened out by conformity, Isolated and kept small by our belief in individualism.

So many ways that we think of people reduce us down: Flatten us out.

Remember that image at the end of the movie Dr. Zhivago: Laura, this image of life, vitality, compassion, goodness, beauty: Laura is picked up off the street, Placed in the Gulag, where her name is reduced to a number, the Number was placed on a piece of paper that was lost, and ultimately forgotten. That is the ultimate image of being flattened out. We can come to feel that

human existence does not matter. We can come to treat people that way. We can come to see our lives in that way.

We struggle for something more: to see ourselves differently. To see other people differently.

Clifford Geertz: anthropologist: was troubled by how when social scientists (and natural scientist) studied various groups of people. They had an overwhelming tendency to reduce them to some simple statistics. Reductionism. Thin understanding. So instead of gathering statistics, he would listen deeply to what people were saying. Thick descriptions.

David Brooks uses that vision of what needs to happen to groups of people: we need to have what he calls "thick institutions." Groups of people that have an enduring impact on us. Give us deeper wisdom, deeper character. Deeper community. Depth.

In the gospel of Luke, we are surprised by the Spirit speaking through the Scripture. Jesus is the character that speaks through the text, and all of the sudden the text has a new dimension. A world of profound depth.

How often have you heard someone say, "Aren't all religions really saying basically the same thing?" I get a little apoplectic when I hear that, and am likely to say vigorously, "No! No, they are not." Pay attention: listen to the depth.

Even the Bible is not saying the same thing. It came from different writers, with different theologies, bumping up against one another, causing friction, sparking fire: passion.

The Bible is not one: it is multi. From the first chapter of the book of Genesis: you can hear multiple voices, disagreeing with each other, bumping up against each other, transforming each other. Are those conformities or are they contradictions? In their rubbing up against each other, they create heat that starts a fire. It keeps us warm. It gives us light: This multidimensional God reveals God's word to us.

The Bible: It is a source of revelation. We Presbyterians call the Bible "unique and without parallel." It is not self-evident to just anyone who opens it and starts to read. We have this tradition that helps us understand it. The Bible is connected to the church: there are different Church traditions.

As best as we can understand it, we ask what was the original meaning of a passage. We attempt to recover that original meaning. We try not to superimpose what we want it to say to fit our prejudices. We want to understand the meaning originally intended by the biblical writers in their time.

The aim is not to tone it down, but to open it up. To ask, what is the powerful, sometimes challenging, ultimately life-changing message?

Presbyterians use the Bible, but we don't have faith in the Bible. There is a nice theological word: bibliolatry: it happens when people turn the Bible into idol. Martin Luther was so concerned about this it is said he threw down a Bible on the floor in midst of worship, pointed at it and said, "That is not your God!"

When it comes to the Bible, we don't use terms like perfect or infallible. The Bible is not infallible, just as the church is not infallible, nor the state, nor science, nor tradition, nor any one pastor: To say they are is to turn them into idols.

We do proclaim that for us, only Jesus is Lord: so we look at the words, the message of Jesus to try to interpret the rest of the Bible. As it seems to fit with him, then it makes sense. If it does not, then we can critique the Bible too.

For Presbyterians, we describe ourselves not as Bible centered, but rather Christ-centered. Because we are Christ centered, then it does not surprise us to discover that parts of the Bible were derived from other ancient literature.

Even some parts lifted and repurposed from other religions. It is no surprise to us that the ancient people learned from the culture around them and said, "That's a great idea: we have something to learn from them."

It does not surprise us that after parts of the Bible were written, some editors came along and changed the text. Like the ending of the Gospel of Mark: it was just too dramatic for some editor, so he "smoothed things out." It is fascinating to try to piece together the meaning of the different theological meaning of each version.

Various lenses help us to look at the Bible. Through the church: Christians inspire us. Prophetic voices help us to see answer. And so today, we gain understanding of the trajectory of the Bible through the inspiration of the arts,

Movies, novels, paintings, songs, music, as well as philosophy and the natural and social sciences. They give us new insight, new understandings. Even other religions can give us new insights.

But when it gets right down to it, our experience as Christians is that we worship God as a living God. The living God speaks to us through the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit speaks sometimes where we most expect it, like in worship. And sometimes the Spirit speaks where we least

expect it in our daily lives. For Martin Luther, it was when a bolt of lightning hit a tree nearby.

We Christians have a great variety of experiences where God speaks in the present. As Jesus says, "Today." Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

So we listen when our hearts are warmed. Or when our imagination is expanded. When our understanding is transformed. It may be a powerful lightning bolt experience. Or it may be a quiet, gentle nudge of conscience.

It may be very emotional. Or it may be very rational.

H.R. Niebuhr talks about it as the experience when the ancient story is transformed and it becomes our story. Today. Now. When a particular passage of the Bible has somehow become true for me, for us. The ancient has become now. The old has become new.

This experience binds us to the Living God. It illumines the mind. It convinces the heart. Christ has spoken to us. Today.

Nehemiah, Ezra leads the people of Israel and they discovered the Bible again.

It was a powerful experience. For them, it was that they were living their lives wrong. They had to change. They felt overwhelmingly guilty. They had failed.

But notice: the scripture says: Ezra told them to Rejoice. You've discovered your life anew.

In Luke, Jesus comes to the synagogue. They lay on pillows. Jesus stands up: reads the scripture: "Today ... the Spirit of the Lord is upon me He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind"

Today: the 2 dimensional world we live in becomes 3 with the presence of the Holy Spirit opening up a new world. The Bible in the power of the Holy Spirit takes on fresh meanings, give light to a new world that is liberating and empowering for people of faith.

Jesus recognizes the poverty of our lives: How we stand for thin values; how our minds are fed with food that does not nourish us; and Jesus feeds us with this food that gives us strength, courage, hope.

We hear that Jesus recognizes us, sees our poverty beyond all pretensions and enriches us with the abundant blessings of God's good creation.

Jesus proclaims release to the captives, and when he speaks all of a sudden we see the chains that bind us and recognize how we are captive: captive to the fear inspired by the culture around

us, captive to the flat ideas that have captured us. In this two dimensional world. And we hear Jesus releasing the chains from our wrists. Unlocking the ankle bracelets that have held us back from doing the amazing things for which we have been created.

Jesus proclaims sight to the blind: we come to see how blind we are to the love of God for us. How blind we are to the brothers and sisters nearby. And all of a sudden we see brothers and sisters by the tens and hundreds and thousands. We see the world in a totally new way,

Today: Jesus says. Our lives in totally new ways. Our lives lived in the midst of the reign of Christ. In the presence of the Holy Spirit. Our Flatland encounters new dimensions in the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Today. Today we live in a world of God's overarching, overwhelming, overflowing grace. NOW. TODAY. Paul Tournier says the task of mature living consists of two things:

1. Finding a Safe Place for yourself;
2. Leaving that Safe Place for a new adventure.

In Jesus, we experience one who knows our hurts, our pains today. Christ is our Safe Place; in him we know who we are and whose we are. As we look to the Bible as our part of the on-going story of the living God, we become free to risk the adventure of interpretation, and the adventure of faith. Christ sets us free to live in the new resurrection life. Through the risk of hearing the Bible anew, we experience an invitation to live in a new dimension of life. A journey of adventure in a new reality because of the dynamic hope that Christ offers.

We may not know exactly what that looks like at first. We may stumble, and fall, but he helps us to rise and to practice living into that new freedom, that new life. Jesus offers an invitation in this passage from Luke that speaks to us: Practice living that new life, living into the reign of God. Because the Kingdom of God, the reign of Christ has come to us: TODAY.

Walter Bruggemann. The Bible Makes Sense. John Knox Press.

David Buttrick. Preaching the New and the Now. Westminster/John Knox Press.

Arthur Cohen and Martin Halverson. A Handbook of Christian Theology. Abingdon Press.

Claude Geffre'. The Risk of Interpretation: On Being Faithful to the Christian Tradition in a Non-Christian Age. Paulist Press.

Confession of 1967

As God has spoken God's word in diverse cultural situations,

The church is confident that God will continue to speak

Through the Scriptures

In a changing world and in every form of human culture.

God's word is spoken to God's church today

Where the Scriptures are faithfully preached

And attentively read

In dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit

And with readiness to receive their truth and direction.