

The exhibition of the Dead Sea Scrolls opened Friday at the Milwaukee Public Museum, and they are expecting quite a crowd. I am anxious to see it myself. The centerpiece of the exhibit is fragments of the scrolls themselves, written over a period of about four hundred years, two thousand years ago. We are amazed at the antiquity of these writings. We will marvel at the artistry of these writings from the time Christ was alive, and the power they had to help form the religions we practice today.

But there is one aspect of the scrolls that stands out to me. They are written in Hebrew, and unless you are a Hebrew scholar, you will not be able to understand them. We have to rely on the interpretation of experts, and they don't always agree. They are artifacts of an ancient culture, curiosities which interest us. We have assigned them a degree of holiness, which gives them importance but can make them seem distant from us. Will they have the power to transform those who come to gaze at them?

Nehemiah tells of the gathering of the people of Israel to hear the reading of the scripture of Moses. The people had been in exile a long time, but the Persian King Artaxerxes had allowed the people to return to Israel, and they had rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. The work was done, and the people were about to be settled in their towns. They had not heard their scripture read for a very long time, and some may not have ever heard it. It had to be interpreted for them, for I'm sure the language was unfamiliar to them. And so, when the people heard the law read to them, they could not get enough of it. They were convinced that they had not been faithful to the law, and resolved to change their ways and make the law the center of their lives. At first there was great lamentation and tears for their waywardness, but Nehemiah tells them to celebrate

because they had rediscovered the law of God. This scripture came alive for them; it had the power to transform.

The gospel tells a different story. Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue. Now I suspect the people of Nazareth had heard this passage read many times. It was quite familiar to them. I suspect that they nodded their heads as they heard it, appreciative of the beauty of the language. They probably were proud of their synagogue and their beautiful scrolls. These were holy writings, stored in a special place in their tabernacle, perhaps adorned with artful carvings. After reading the scripture, Jesus sat down to preach what may be the shortest sermon in history, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus tells them that the scripture is alive, that the power of the scripture is not some dead but beautiful thing from ages past, but had the power to transform lives even in that day. But the people missed the point. They praised his gracious words, but did not hear what he said. The scripture to them had become an artifact of their tradition, but not something living.

We run the danger of hearing scripture like the people of Nazareth, as an artifact of our traditions. We read four passages of scripture read every week in church, even more than the Baptists. Those of us who read the daily offices or come to daily Eucharist hear even more. Clearly the scripture is crucial to our worship. But I will admit that sometimes the sheer volume of it and the familiarity of it can dull my ability to hear it deeply, to convict me of my waywardness and lead me into new life.

A recently retired friend of a friend has a large motor home which he uses to travel around the country and see all the sights to be seen. He lives in the motor home full time, and just travels from place to place. He has been to a number of national parks from Acadia in Maine to the Grand Canyon, from Glacier to the Everglades. He has seen it all, all the beautiful

spots for which this country can be grateful. He was asked, “So what do you do, when you travel around in your big motor home?” It was a hard question for this man to understand – “What do you mean, what do I do, I see the sights in the country, take some pictures and move on.” But what do you actually do when you are observing these sights? What difference does it make to you that you have seen them? How have you affected the lives of those around you? What do you do differently in your life.” This was a tough question for him to answer because he was basically just collecting these experiences, adding them to his album, but not being affected by them.

Are we just sightseers, like the man with the motorhome, absorbing the beauty of scripture as we would a nice sunset, or hearing Christ’s claim to be the anointed one, and saying, “Oh, isn’t that interesting?” Or will we be like the people in Nehemiah and allow the scripture to be alive, to convict us of our waywardness, to transform us and convince us there is a better way to live?

If the people of Nazareth had a hard time seeing the living nature of the Isaiah passage as Jesus read it, how can we make it alive almost three thousand years after it was written? I believe it can be every bit as fresh as it was back then. Let’s see.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me.” Jesus is not the only one anointed here. We have been anointed too, at our baptism, marked with chrism with the sign of the cross, marked as Christ’s own forever.

“He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” We certainly haven’t run out of poor in the last thousands of years. They still need a message of hope, and a message of love, that despite their economic circumstances, despite their handicaps, there are people who care about them and a God who loves them.

“He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives.” What holds people captive today? Certainly there is still oppression. There are refugees and political prisoners who also need to hear the good news of hope. There are prisoners who need to be visited. But there are also people who are captive to the expectations of our consumer culture, captive to dull jobs, captive to family dysfunctions who need to hear that they can be released by the freedom of Jesus Christ.

“to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind.” Christ is still the way to healing. Those blinded by their sins need to know they can be forgiven. We can be reconcilers and listeners, assuring folks that bodies, minds, and spirits can be healed.

“To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” This is thought to refer to the year of Jubilee when debts were forgiven, and land was left fallow and returned to original owners. What would that look like today? That’s probably another whole sermon, but I think at the least it means sharing from our substance, forgiving those who trespassed against us, and being stewards of God’s creation

Scripture is a gift and a treasure. But it does not belong in a museum to be gawked at behind a glass case. We cannot let it become an arcane language that we cannot understand any longer. Let it come alive for us. Through Jesus Christ, the living Word, let it now be fulfilled in our hearing.