

Epiphanies

Epiphany of our Lord

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Texts: Isaiah 60.1-6,
 Psalm 72.1-7, 10-14,
 Ephesians 3.1-12,
 Matthew 2.1-12

Introduction to the reading of Isaiah 60:

The passage we read from Isaiah today comes from that final section of the prophecy sometimes called Third Isaiah. It reflects the time in Israel's history when they are returning from exile....seventy years spent in a foreign land. After that season of darkness, this prophecy gives voice to the hope of the returning exiles.

Do you know something of the sweet relief and joy that comes when you finally see light after a dark night of the soul? Maybe it was the freedom of a last chemo treatment or a phone call from the child you thought you'd never hear from again. Maybe it was your first paycheck after two years without work or the first time you felt faith rise up in you after a long season of doubt. If you've ever experienced the breaking of the dawn after a very long night then you can imagine what it was like for the prophet to speak these words from Isaiah 60.

For Israel the dark night of the soul was the captivity and exile of their citizens for well over a generation. They had been defeated, their city destroyed, the temple lay in ruins, and their freedom gone. Their suffering, though, was not just the loss of political standing and power. They experienced the exile as a time of alienation from God and it was that sense of alienation that weighed so heavily on their souls during the exile. And here in Isaiah 60 the prophet envisioned not only a return to their homeland, not only a restoration of their place and position in the world,

but more importantly a restoration of their place and position in the heart of God.

As you read a bit more of the context for this prophecy in Isaiah you begin to realize that there is more going on here than simple relief that their suffering is over. Chapter 59 made clear that the sense of alienation came not from God's side but from theirs. It was their sin that placed a barrier between them and God. Verse 8: "The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace." They needed more than just a savior who would bring them home again. They needed a sage -- one who would enlighten the people to know what makes for peace, what constitutes justice. They needed to make a new life for themselves and they needed some light to show them the way. Isaiah 59 ends with this promise: "And he will come to Zion as Redeemer, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the Lord. And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: my spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children's children, says the Lord from now on and forever."¹

Chapter 60 opens: "Arise, shine, for your light has come...." The sweet relief and joy we're talking about in Isaiah 60 is the kind that comes when you discover how to break down the barriers that you yourself constructed. The light that comes does not magically restore all things. As one commentator reminds his readers, what is described in Isaiah 60 - Israel as the epicenter of the world - has no historical precedence. It has never happened.² Not after the exile. Not during the 1st century at the birth of Christ. Not now.

So how is this prophecy good news? Why do we read it on Epiphany every year? We read it because it describes so beautifully the *process* of salvation that God's people have been undergoing since the time of this prophecy -- since the birth of Jesus Christ -- since the beginning of your life and mine. It describes what it is like when thick darkness covers everything and you

¹ Isaiah 59.20-21

² G. Malcolm Sinclair, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 198-199.

cannot see and there is no warmth and your hope is gone...then the Lord arises on you and you can lift up your eyes and suddenly see and as you look around, you find that hope is gathered before you.

I heard an interview on NPR³ around Epiphany a couple of years ago. The story stayed with me because it was such a great illustration of what it is like when God's light arises in someone's life. Sherry Maples was a captain in the Madison, Wisconsin police force. I heard her being interviewed by Krista Tippet on what was then called *Speaking of Faith*. The program was exploring the teaching and impact of the Vietnamese zen master, Thich Nhat Hanh, whose writings during the Vietnam war had a huge impact on Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sherry Maples was a cop when she went on retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh and when she heard him teaching about living in the world mindfully and embodying peace she was skeptical. Especially when she heard that one of the first commitments they were asked to make was to never kill. Being a police officer, she knew that sometimes circumstances required that she be willing to exercise deadly force. She thought this path of enlightenment was not for her until she talked to one of the leaders about her dilemma who said to her: "who else would we want to carry a gun than someone who will do it mindfully." So she stayed for the retreat and the first thing she noticed was that her heart softened. She realized how mechanical she had become and how hardened to the suffering and realities of life. She practiced the things she learned and realized it was possible to bring this to her work as a police officer. As her attitude and energy changed, the reactions of people around her changed....even people she needed to arrest and put in jail.

She told the story of answering a domestic violence call. She described it as essentially a situation of breaking up being hard to do. In the course of exchanging custody with his ex-wife a man was holding his little girl hostage. There was no history of violence in the family before this but the little girl and the mother were scared and intimidated. Typically, Sherry said she would have slapped cuffs on the guy and hauled him off to jail but

³ National Public Radio

instead she got him to release the girl and sent her and her mother away and then went back in to talk to him from her heart. In five minutes time he was bawling. He was in incredible pain. She realized that a lot of their police work was dealing with misplaced anger because of the suffering in people's lives. She ran into him three days later on the street and he picked her up and gave her this huge hug and said that she saved his life that day.

I share this story because it is such a wonderful example of how the light of God can arise in a person's life and illuminate what constitutes justice and makes for peace. But I also share it because it is also a wonderful example of how the light of God continues to expand in the world.

We read this prophecy from Isaiah on Epiphany each year because it describes what was happening for those wise sages who came from the East and recognized in the birth of Christ an explosion of those prophetic words (whether they had ever heard those words or not). They experienced an expansion of the promise beyond the prophet and his progeny. They experienced the promise that would come through Israel to the gentile world...to all the world...expanding forward through time to include not just those for whom it was first spoken but to rest on this child born in Bethlehem where the words of the prophet could take on flesh in the life and ministry of Christ, so we could see and hear just what constitutes justice and what makes for peace. And as the stories of Jesus were told and retold – written – copied – shared—that light continues to expand to fill this room and touch your life. And it continues on the move as you take the light with you.

The spirit of Epiphany is one of rejoicing. In my reading for this day an author mentioned a piece of jazz that for him captures the spirit of this day.⁴ The song was recorded in one sitting completely improvised by David Brubeck and his band. It was on the occasion of his youngest sons' birth - the child he and his wife called their grand finale. He was on his way to the recording studio when he got the call that his wife was in labor. After his son's birth he made his way to the studio and this piece of music

⁴ Andrew Nagy-Benson, *Feasting on the Word* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 194.

burst out of his joy. And it was contagious because each one of his band members got swept up in it as they joined him. The piece is both deeply personal in that it celebrates the birth of his child but as the piece is given to the wider world the impact of it is now communal.

That is what both Isaiah and Matthew envision today. To be touched by the light of God is deeply personal but the impact of that enlightenment is meant to be communal and far reaching. As our prayer for meditation today I am going to play this piece⁵ entitled the *Charles Matthew Hallelujah* with the hope that it sweeps each one of us up into the spirit of this day so that we can go forth from this place as the prophet envisions: able to see and be radiant – with hearts that can thrill and rejoice - for *our* light has indeed come.

⁵ CD: Dave Brubeck, *Time Further Out*, The Dave Brubeck Quartet, 1961