

3 Epiphany, Yr. A

January 22, 2017

Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

We belong to a challenging religion and live in challenging time, so this will be a challenging sermon!

Epiphany – while it’s primarily about the revelation of Jesus to more and more people and primarily about the way we come to see God as manifest in Jesus, I think it’s also helpful to look at these questions from the other point of view – from the point of view of the one who’s getting it, the one who “sees the light.” In that regard, Jesus, who had been following John the Baptist as John’s disciple, now, when he hears that John has been arrested, sees something new. He sees that he will be the one to pick up where John left off and, as Matthew tells us, Jesus, from that time on, began to proclaim John’s message: REPENT FOR THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN HAS COME NEAR. Our reading goes on to show the first disciples seeing the light, and they get up and follow Jesus. Other people get to see the light, too, as Jesus teaches, proclaims the good news and, as Mathew tells us, cures every disease and sickness among the people. So the first thing to note about this seeing, this coming to some new understanding, isn’t a passive exercise: one sees and then one acts, moves, changes one’s life in a radical way.

We all know the story of Paul and how he, too saw the light. You’ll remember that he was a zealous persecutor of Christians and then, one day, on the road to Damascus, had an overwhelming experience, both literally and figuratively, when he was knocked off his horse and encountered the living Christ. And as a result of that encounter, he totally changed direction; he REPENTED in the literal sense of that word, and became not only a Christian, but a missionary, a preacher, a builder of churches, traveling throughout the known world. This morning we heard part of his letter to a church he had started in Corinth. After he had moved on, that Corinthian church developed some problems and we’re hearing part of his letter to them, trying, as it were, to remind them of the light they had received.

Corinth must have been an interesting place. It was a major trade and commercial center, since it was on an isthmus and had two harbors, one facing Asia and one facing Italy. It was seen as a tough town and even had the distinction of having its name made into a verb: to “corinthianize” meant to go to the dogs. Paul’s congregation was probably a mix of Gentiles and Jews, slaves, the poor and uneducated and some civic leaders and newly wealthy folks. Corinth attracted entrepreneurs and, since it had no indigenous aristocrats to snub them or to frustrate their ambitions, it provided a unique opportunity for people to compete for status so that they could become the new aristocratic class.

Given the makeup of the community, coupled with the fact that human nature means that we each always bring our own ideas, interests, loyalties, backgrounds and the very human inclination to seek our own advantage, we shouldn’t be surprised that the church in Corinth was having problems. The problem Paul is addressing in this part of the letter is factionalism. It doesn’t sound like a doctrinal dispute, but more like some kind of spiritual one-upsmanship. Because they were jockeying for status in other ways, too. Apparently some were coming early to the Eucharistic meal and eating everything in sight, so that the latecomers, probably those

that were workers and slaves, had nothing to eat and were humiliated by the poor offering they themselves brought. In addition, there were status concerns over how spiritual one was – some thought they were extra-strong Christians, and therefore above the laws that bound more ordinary mortals. The theory apparently was that if your essence was spiritual, you were free to do whatever you wanted with your body. You can imagine where that went. And, as you'll remember, they were competing over spiritual gifts – ranking them, so that, for instance, speaking in tongues was the top gift and it became a kind of benchmark whereby you could gauge where YOUR gift was.

We hear part of Paul's response this morning. One wonders if he or his editor took out what must have been words of frustration: GOOD GRIEF, people! It's in response to all this that Paul articulated his doctrine of the Body of Christ. He wanted each church to be a microcosm of what humanity, in its entirety, was destined to become – centers of unity of the faith and hope and love of the children of God, with diversity and difference but without division. Their diversity was to be transcended by their recognition that all are made in the image of God, and all are precious and loved. So, each person and each community had a call, a vocation, to live beyond individual concerns in such a way that they would both show God's glory, God's face, to the world, and that they would, by their way of life, contribute to the renewal of the creation. Paul was schooled in the Hebrew Scriptures. And this was a vision from those scriptures. At the core of the Biblical value system is the idea, the vision, that it was possible to live in such a way that shalom, peace, the peaceable kingdom of Isaiah, became a reality.

There are many points of contact between these scriptures and our world today, but as I read the news I think that the experience of factionalism and the havoc it creates in community are what jump out as our contemporary experience. We have plenty of difference and diversity – but what we have in spades is DIVISION. During the past week I read several things debating about who were the REAL Americans – in this case, the contest was between rural and urban. Or there are the divisions between the haves and the have-nots, or the Democrats and Republicans, or conservatives and liberals, or Christians and non-Christians. Given a few minutes we could list many more. Paul would be shaking his head or, at the very least, writing US a letter.

I'd like us to think for a minute about the light each of us has. Jesus, the disciples, Paul – all SAW something with the light they'd been given that allowed them to answer God's call and to live lives of love and courage. What about us? Someone once spoke about each of us as walking around with our light of understanding shining forth from our hearts, sort of like a lantern shining out on to the world. But our lights are often pretty limited and shine only on those things that reflected what was in our hearts. So, if you were afraid, your light would shine on all those things to be feared; if your heart was filled with hate, your little beam of light would shine on potential enemies; if you were greedy, your light illuminated things you could accumulate. But that kind of light is way too small. The question is how we can enlarge it. I think the first thing is to recognize how small a field our heart lights illuminate and then to pray and search for more light and for a wider perspective that will lead to a bigger heart. Remember the first astronauts in space sending back that picture of our beautiful earth, floating in space – how different it looked, with boundaries non-existent. Or we could think about it another way: as science has

enlarged ITS light, we've come to learn that we're NOT all separate like cogs in a machine, but are instead, part of a great, luminous web of being, connected, interdependent.

Certainly we're tempted to self-protection and self-interest and beyond that, to tribalism and factionalism. In exploring this, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (*Not in God's Name*) points out that humans have always needed groups to survive. But that in situations of scarcity, we cling more closely to our group, because we're competing against OTHER groups for resources. He makes the point that we have the capacity to be both altruistic (mostly to those in our group, whatever that is) and violent to outsiders. But, he says, at the core of the Biblical value system is the idea that both individuals and cultures are judged by their willingness to extend care beyond the boundaries of family, tribe, and nation. He has a simple formula for remedying what he calls our groupishness, and for widening our perspective: It's role reversal. My father used to say that you couldn't judge a person until you'd walked a mile in their moccasins – same idea. I've often wondered, only half seriously, if we couldn't solve all the problems of our world if each of us were to be changed overnight into someone else – men to women, blacks to white, rich to poor, first world to third world. In my scheme, we live that way long enough to REALLY understand. We can then change back, but we can't forget. Of course, that's not going to work, but I think we can use what light we have: first our awareness that we occupy privileged positions in the world and that we need a broader perspective and second our imaginations as well as our intelligence to increase our vision, and finally, our action which would be to bring more light to the world by getting up like those first disciples and following in the footsteps of Christ.

Remember the story of the rabbi who asked his students how they could tell when night was receding and day was coming? One thought it was when, from a distance you could see a tree and tell whether it was an oak from a maple, one thought it was when you could distinguish between a cow and a horse. No, the rabbi said, until you can look at another person and see your brother or your sister, it's still night.

Please allow me to close with a prayer that's attributed to St. Francis:

May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that we may live deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people, so that we may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless us with tears to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world, so that we can do what others claim cannot be done.