

2 Epiphany, Yr. C  
January 19, 2020  
Isaiah 49:1-7

We started this morning hearing the collect in which we prayed that we, being illuminated by word and sacrament will shine with the radiance of Christ's glory so that we will make God known to the ends of the earth. And Epiphany is about illumination. We're praying that somehow, Christ, who is the light and the life of the world, will help us to SEE. That's picked up again in the Gospel when Jesus, after John's disciples asked him where he was staying, said that they should COME AND SEE. Light, illumination, seeing – all pointing towards the central theme of Epiphany, encouraging us to SEE more, and more deeply into those essential questions: WHO IS GOD and what is God's hope for the world? And then, WHO AM I and HOW AM I TO LIVE IN ACCORD WITH GOD'S HOPE? What we see by the light and life of Christ is that kindness and justice and righteousness and truth and love are not "extras" but rather are built into the very structure of the universe and they are that to which we, as followers of Christ, have been called.

As you may know, I'm preparing for my Clearing class. I'm planning to talk about the American vision, what it is and how we can realize it. So, in writing this sermon, a lot of things came together: God's vision, the American vision, and because it's MLK day, his vision.

The Old Testament prophets talked a lot about God's vision. You may remember Amos saying that without a vision, the people will perish. We need to know what life is about and where we're headed and what we're asked to be and do. We know that Isaiah had a vision – that vision of the peaceable kingdom. We heard from Isaiah last week where he laid out his call to help make that vision a reality, part of which, again referring to light, had to do with bringing sight to the blind and bringing prisoners up out of darkness. Today we hear from Isaiah again. He's been trying, he says, but looking back over what he's done, he's pretty frustrated. I HAVE LABORED IN VAIN; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity. But then there's that little word "YET" – Yet surely my cause is with the Lord. And then into that space created by that little word, God speaks. It's interesting, isn't it, to hear what God says. Not OK, Isaiah, take a break; I'll take it

from here. But instead, quite the opposite: “It’s too light a thing that you should be working to raise up the tribes of Israel; actually, I WILL GIVE YOU AS A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS, THAT MY SALVATION SHALL REACH TO THE END OF THE EARTH.” Let me enlarge the task to which you’ve been called!

Desmond Tutu, using the word “Dream” instead of vision, has written a book titled *God Has A Dream*:

“I have a dream,” God says. “Please help me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring...where my children will know that they are members of one family...my family.”

And Tutu certainly is someone walking in Isaiah’s footsteps. Someone else walking in those footsteps is Jim Wallis. He’s an evangelical leader, but he’s also a reconciler and bridge builder. Recently he was working with our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry and leaders from other denominations. Their concern is that the central truths of the Gospel are being lost in the political ruckus and struggle for power. From their conversations, Wallis has written a book, *Christ in Crisis*. He sees the Christian church in danger of losing the Gospel and urges the church to reclaim Jesus. So he writes about the central teachings of Christ. One of the chapters is about the Image of God and what that means. He goes back to the creation story of Genesis in which God breathes life into the first humans and says that they are made in God’s own image and likeness. That raises a couple of questions: first, what does it mean to be made in God’s image and second, what are the implications of how we treat each other in light of that creation. Jesus’ radical love, he says, comes from that understanding, that every person is a child of God and that seeking to denigrate or have power over any other person is a sin against God’s creation. MLK has something to say about this: WHEN YOU COME TO THE POINT THAT you LOOK IN THE FACE OF ANY PERSON AND SEE DEEP DOWN WITHIN WHAT RELIGION CALLS “THE IMAGE OF GOD” YOU BEGIN TO LOVE IN SPITE OF. NO MATTER WHAT THE PERSON DOES, YOU SEE GOD’S IMAGE THERE.” This dovetailed with my class preparation because I’m looking at both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. You’ll remember the Declaration: that all men (sic) are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, among them the rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That’s the vision of the Founders, informed by Christian theology, certainly, and by the principles of the enlightenment, but also by their study of failed forms of government. But you’ll also recall that when the Constitution was drafted, the writers declared that slaves were 3/5 of a person. Because of the belief that all humans were created equal and were children of God, it was necessary for advocates of slavery to

argue that blacks were not fully human. And even though many of the founders railed against slavery, they found it necessary to include that phrase in the document in order to get the support of the slave-owning states.

Wallis points out that the early church was wrestling with a similar issue with regard to including the Gentiles. Remember last week we heard Peter saying that he had come to understand that God shows no partiality or Paul arguing that in Christ the walls that separated us have come down: no Jew/Gentile, no man/woman, no slave/free. And those early communities were working publicly and deliberately to live out that inclusive vision.

Wallis points out that the racism that plagues us today is the result of slavery but he quotes Dr. King's words of hope:

“When our days become dreary with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

And Wallis talks about a conversation he had with a Roman Catholic priest who taught at Fordham. The priest said that he always asked his students whether they have ever heard racism named and called a sin from the pulpits of the churches. The answer, he said, was almost always NO. The point being made is that if the churches are to be true to their vocation, they need to speak the truth about this. And I'm glad to be able to say that the Episcopal Church has done so. Racism is a sin.

And finally, to Martin Luther King. He also articulated a vision, a dream. He also, like Isaiah, suffered fatigue and frustration, to say nothing of fear for his family as well as for himself. But he also was called to speak in a way to bring to light the sin and devastation of racism. And, on this day, perhaps it's fitting to remember his eloquent words:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream that one day...little black boys and black girls will be able to join hand with little white boys and girls and walk together as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope...and our faith. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, knowing that we will be free one day. And when we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we're free at last!"

That vision and Isaiah's vision and Tutu's vision – all of them are the vision of God. And all of them are reminders to us of who we are and to what we have been called. Amen.