

3 Epiphany, Yr. A

January 26, 2020

Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-23

I'd like to begin by making a prefatory comment. And that's about Matthew's use of the phrase the Kingdom of Heaven, rather than the Kingdom of God, which is what the other Gospel writers used. That might seem insignificant, but it hasn't proven to be so. Matthew probably uses "heaven" because, as a devout Jew, he wouldn't write or pronounce the name of God, so he would have substituted heaven. But that substitution can have unfortunate ramifications, because "heaven" can easily come to mean the afterlife or somewhere up there where God lives and reigns and then the Gospel itself can be twisted to mean that God isn't concerned with the here and now, with the suffering and injustice that's right in front of us. It can be used to justify doing nothing about suffering now, to justify a kind of pie-in-the-sky teaching and living like, "I'm really sorry you're suffering now, but just put up with it and you'll get your reward in the hereafter." Scholars who write about slavery point out that that was how the gospel was commonly taught to slaves. So "heaven" language can result in an over-focus on the next life all the while missing the fact that we're supposed to be building and protecting God's kingdom here and now. It leads to stuff like the rapture theology that was quite prevalent in Dallas. That idea that this life was something to be raced through and that one of these days, God would just "rapture" the good folks up into heaven and leave the rest of us behind. People focused on the hereafter can easily ignore issues around poverty or education or the environment because they think that none of that REALLY matters. As one colleague put it, you can be so heavenly focused that you are no earthly good. So the better translation is the Kingdom of God. That was Jesus' central message; that's what he was about. Living and dying in such a way as to not only TELL us who God is, but to SHOW us what an enlightened life looks like. To show us what God's Kingdom, God's reign, would look like and then to invite us to follow him in making it a reality. Light and life.

If we look at the flip side, the darkness side, the readings have plenty to tell us. In the Isaiah reading, it's good to note that Zebulun and Naphtali were

in the path, first of the Assyrians and then later, of course, under the rule of the Romans. The darkness there was political, economic and military oppression. That yoke, Isaiah tells them, will be broken.

Paul points to another kind of darkness in his letter to the Corinthians. Factionalism and division are tearing the community apart. My baptism is better than yours, or later, I'm more spiritual than you. This kind of dissension seems to be something we humans have a hard time getting past. How many times have we talked about our fear of the "other" or our seemingly inbred intolerance and prejudice? I mentioned last week that these scriptures dovetail with my class preparations and those of you who remember your American history will remember that factionalism was one of the evils that the founders were worried about. Me and mine are all that matters. Speaking of that, I was looking through a book called *Dying of Whiteness* and the author, studying health care problems in the US talks about research that shows that people will refuse assistance that they themselves would benefit from if that same benefit would be offered to others that they consider lesser, and those lesser folks, as you might imagine are people usually of a different race or class. That's another kind of darkness.

In the Gospel, it might be easy to miss the darkness. There's that opening line: when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. It had to be a crisis moment for Jesus. John being arrested and imprisoned was a powerful illustration of what would happen to anyone preaching this Gospel over and against those forces of darkness, in this case symbolized by the Roman empire. Perhaps Jesus realized just how much this was going to cost him. And then there's that final line: Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. You don't have to read much further to get a list: those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics and paralytics – that's a listing that shows another kind of darkness.

But then, breaking into all this darkness, comes the light. The light that illuminates the darkness, that shows it for what it is. And then comes the

invitation: follow me, shine the light on all the darkness, and then bring the light of healing and hope to bear as we move toward God's kingdom. That's the call that those first fishermen heard. But that's also the call that each of us heard in one way or another or we wouldn't be here this morning. We see, always asking that we see more and with more clarity. But then there's that rubber meets the road question: WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT WHAT WE SEE? WHAT DOES IT REALLY MEAN TO WALK WITH JESUS?

I'm going to suggest that it means something different for each of us and that it means something different at different stages of our lives. We hear about really heroic things, about people going off to work and serve in depressed and crime-ridden areas. Or people who sell everything they own and go and build orphanages and schools. Most of us aren't able to do that, given where we are in our lives. Possibly the young people among us will hear that kind of a call. But what about the rest of us?

Here I'm going to go back to the class once more. Maybe you all already knew this, but I found out in my reading that the language in the Declaration of Independence about the pursuit of happiness doesn't mean happiness in the sense that we use it at all. It actually means something more like flourishing, or well-being, and it's tied to Aristotle's view of VIRTUE which for him meant living a life of excellence, using your gifts and talents to their fullest. All of us can still do that. Maybe your gift is in the arts in which you create things of beauty to enhance the lives of others. Or maybe you have the gift of being able to truly listen to people, the gift of empathy. Or maybe you have the kind of emotional intelligence and that enables you to be a peace-maker. Or maybe your gift is hospitality, or generosity. Any and all of those gifts contribute to the Kingdom.

Carol Ann sent me a link to a news story about a woman in Viet Nam. You would all remember her; she was the young child who was burned by napalm, there were pictures of her running naked down the road, her clothes burned off, screaming in pain. In the interview, she talked about that pain and all the surgeries she went through, about her despair and her temptation to suicide. But then, she said, she discovered the New

Testament and was struck by the need to forgive. My prayer list, she said, now had all the names of my enemies. The gift of forgiveness.

And then, on a much lighter note, I saw something about a Wisconsin woman who died at the age of 85. She was adored by her children and grandchildren, who wrote her obituary, setting out their experience and memories of her.

“Let a dog, or two or three, share your bed. Say the rosary while you walk them.

Go to church with a chicken sandwich in your purse. Cry at the consecration, every time. Give the chicken sandwich to your homeless friend after Mass.

Go to a nursing home and kiss everyone. When you learn someone’s name, share their patron saint’s story, and their feast day, so that they can celebrate. Invite new friends to Thanksgiving dinner. If they are from another country and you have trouble understanding them, learn to “listen with an accent.”

Never say mean things about anybody; they are “poor souls to pray for.”

Correspond with the imprisoned and have lunch with the cognitively challenged.

Offer rides to people carrying a big load or caught in the rain or summer heat. Believe the hitchhiker you pick up who says he is a landscaper and his name is Peat Moss.

Help anyone struggling to get their kids into a car or shopping cart or across a parking lot.

Give to every charity that asks. Choose to believe the best about what they do with your money, no matter what your children say they discovered online.

Allow the homeless to keep warm in your car while you are at church.

Take magazines you've already read to your doctors' office for others to enjoy. Do not tear off the mailing label, "because if someone wants to contact me, that would be nice."

And then one final thought about what we can do, this one from theologian Karl Barth: To clasp hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.

And we can all surely do that. Amen.