

Wondrous Possibilities: A Rising Star

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Epiphany Sunday – January 3, 2010

Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12;

Matthew 2:1-12

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Happy New Year!

I say this to you not only because it's a new year for us, but because the scriptures for Epiphany—Isaiah, the Psalm, Ephesians, and Matthew, each and every one—say “happy new year” to us in their own way. Epiphany is technically January 6, but may be observed on the Sunday preceding or the Sunday after, and one of the lectionaries we follow recommends this Sunday for the observance, and that's what we're doing. And all the scriptures for what is called in some traditions Epiphanytide, the weeks following Epiphany, tell us of wondrous possibilities.

An epiphany is the light bulb that goes on over your head when you have an “aha!” experience, a glimpse of the sacred, an insight, a solution to a problem. In Christian tradition, Epiphany is a day and a season when we consider how the divine was manifest in Jesus' life, teachings, and ministry. In a progressive Christian environment such as ours, we might think of Epiphany as a season when we consider our own divine possibilities as well. So the theme for our season is Wondrous Possibilities!

Please pray with me....[prayer]

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...”

Thus chapter 40 of the book of Isaiah begins, intended to uplift the children of Israel, who have suffered a dispersion, an exile that separated them from their beloved city of Jerusalem, the site of God's Temple. It comes at the beginning of what has been designated as second Isaiah, a segment of the book written as Cyrus of Persia has conquered the Babylonians who had forced the Hebrews into exile from their homeland, the Cyrus who is seen as an instrument of God because he allows the Hebrews to return home.

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...” But second Isaiah goes further than celebrating the return of the exiles. It displays an understanding of God—an epiphany—that recognizes the universality of the previously nationalist deity of Israel. This is not only their God, but the God of the universe, thus, “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ...Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you...A multitude of camels shall cover you...They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.”

Now in seminary we used to laugh at the phrase “a multitude of camels shall cover you,” but what it means is, that since caravans bringing merchandise from the east consisted of camels, that many caravans would come to them bringing the riches of the world. Now, this is not a bad vision for our church, who struggles to make budget. We could use a multitude of camels covering our assets!

Then from Psalm 72 we hear, “Give the ruler your justice, O God, and your righteousness...May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressors.” In describing the expectations of the perfect ruler, the Psalmist, like Isaiah, also has an epiphany—telling us his own understanding of God’s nature. And, like Isaiah, the Psalmist strikes a universalist chord, writing, “May all rulers fall down before him, all nations give him service for delivering the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. The ruler has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence their life is redeemed; and precious is their blood in his sight”—in other words, precious are their lives in his sight.

Our passage from Ephesians begins with the apostle Paul reminding the church at Ephesus why he is a prisoner, because he has fought for the equality of Gentiles in the largely Jewish church. With Isaiah and the Psalmist, he proclaims his own epiphany, one that includes the universality of the God of Jesus and of Mary. “In former generations, Saint Paul writes, “This mystery was not made known to humanity, as it has now been revealed to Christ’s holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

This, Paul declares to the church at Ephesus which blends Jewish and Gentile Christians, is (quote) “the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (unquote). Not only is the church to make known human equality in its rich variety to the rulers and authorities of *this* world, but also to the angelic powers of the cosmos. This is an example of how grass roots theology can reveal a divine epiphany even to the angels.

And finally we come to the Gospel of Matthew’s description of the sages, the wise men, the magi coming from the East, the home of other ancient religions, who follow their own epiphany, a star, to this new ruler. This tells us something of Matthew’s epiphany, which, like that of the prophet Isaiah and of the poet the Psalmist, and of the apostle Saint Paul, is universalist in its understanding of God. Jesus is not just for his own nation of Israel, he is the light to the nations of which Isaiah prophesied, he is the ruler who defends the cause of the poor of which the Psalmist sings, he is the mystery of human equality in all of its rich diversity which Paul preaches. So the sages from the East in Matthew’s story, which was written with Hebrew scriptures in mind, bring gold, frankincense, and myrrh as Isaiah said they would.

Thus when we proclaim that no one has to be a member of this church or any church to come to our table of Holy Communion—for many of us, an epiphany of our own—when we declare that this is not our table but God’s table and that every person is a beloved child of God, we are proclaiming Matthew’s understanding that everyone’s gift is welcome, Paul’s understanding of a “mystery hidden for ages” that all varieties of people are welcome, the Psalmist’s understanding that everyone in need will be delivered from oppression and violence, and Isaiah’s understanding that all peoples “shall see and be radiant” and our hearts “shall thrill and rejoice.” As progressive as we may seem, we are still—thanks be to God!—quite traditional.

“Arise, shine, for our light has come!”

“Give all leaders your justice, O God!”

“All people are fellow inheritors of God’s promise.”

“For we observed Christ’s star at its rising.”

What wondrous possibilities! A rising star!