

Sermon 3rd week after Epiphany Year A January 23, 2011

■ *the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.*

In this third Sunday after Epiphany we find imagery of light and darkness in our readings...promises of light and liberation, and the prophecy of Isaiah being fulfilled in Jesus as he makes himself manifest in his new residence of Capernaum to Jews and Gentiles alike.

The name Isaiah means "the salvation of the Lord" or "the Lord is salvation." The central message of the prophet Isaiah is that [salvation](#) comes from God—not man. God alone is Savior, Ruler and King. Isaiah was devoutly spiritual and loved his country and people and spoke out against the culture in which he found himself. He lived in a culture where the disparities between rich and poor were growing, the rich were growing richer and the poor, poorer. He spoke truth to power...realizing that many of the policies of the ruling class were in place to benefit those with wealth and power. Today's passage from Isaiah returns to the Epiphany imagery of light and darkness, promising victory of one over the other. Equating darkness with oppression, the prophet promises light and liberation. Victory is celebrated. All will benefit from this act of liberation, especially those who were in anguish. Today's passage is part of the Immanuel chapters within the Book of Isaiah and is coupled with today's gospel, because Jesus it is seen as the fulfillment of the prophecy.

In the gospel according to Matthew we learn how dangerous it is for the Jews who are proclaiming change. John the Baptizer has been killed for his activities, and Jesus is afraid enough that he relocates to Capernaum. Jesus moves to Capernaum and in this passage we hear Matthew's version of the calling of the first four disciples Andrew, Peter, James and John. Capernaum was the home of these first four followers of Jesus.

Capernaum is located on the northwest corner of the Sea of Galilee. It is the sight of many of Jesus' miracles...a total of 12 miracles recorded in the gospels took place in Capernaum. This passage from Matthew repeats the prophecy from Isaiah today: *"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles-- the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."*

Capernaum was a Jewish community at the time of Christ but was ruled by the Romans. It was a place where Jewish and Gentile culture mixed. It was actually a Roman centurion who built the original synagogue in Capernaum that we hear about in the gospel according to Luke 7:5). If you visit it today, you will see the 5th century Jewish synagogue that sits on top of the original synagogue that it is believed Jesus taught in...and the house of Simon Peter that has been excavated. In Capernaum Jesus gathers these first fishermen followers as well as Matthew the tax collector and begins to preach an end to the current empire. He knows what is at stake, and he moves forward without being overly cautious. He calls for a turn-around, repentance. He preaches a gospel of restorative justice.

Capernaum was a largely poor town with buildings made of crude stone without mortar to hold the stones together. He saw the great disparities between the poor Jewish community and the wealth of the surrounding Roman cities such as Tiberius on the Galilee. He preached a gospel of radical change that ultimately killed him just like it did John the Baptist.

Howard Thurman the influential African-American author, philosopher, theologian, educator and civil rights leader who was a mentor to Martin Luther King, wrote a poem titled *The Work of Christmas* that I believe speaks to this season of Epiphany in which we find ourselves. He wrote *"When the song of the angels is stilled When the star in the sky is gone. When the kings and prince are home. When the shepherds are back with their flock. The work of Christmas begins -To find the lost - To heal the broken - To feed the hungry - To release the prisoner - To rebuild nations - To bring peace among all people - To make music in the heart"*.

During this season of Epiphany we are using Eucharistic Prayer C which emphasizes creation and God's self-revelation in the Old Testament. In the prayer following the words of institution the prayer says *"Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only and not for renewal."* It serves as a reminder to us that coming to this place week after week is not only about bringing us comfort, but to challenge us to change...to look at our lives where we need new life and renewal.

I don't know about you, but I don't like change very much. I'm old enough to be more or less set in my ways and don't like being challenged to think or do things differently all the time. Yet, the gospel is **always all about change** and renewal...willing to put myself out there in the midst of the uncertainty of life...and step into faith. To not do so is to rely on my own ability to save myself and not heed Isaiah's message that [salvation](#) comes from God—not human beings...and certainly not from me.

This is the work of renewal that we speak of in our liturgies, the acknowledgement that we cannot do this work on our own, but it is only with God's help that we can be given the strength to move from where we find ourselves today, to a place that God would have us go...a place that left to ourselves we would rather not go, but by God's grace we go anyway.

So, the nagging question of epiphany is how will we advance the work of Christmas... To find the lost - To heal the broken - To feed the hungry - To release the prisoner - To rebuild nations - To bring peace among all people - To make music in the heart".

"May you and I come to this Table not for solace only, but for strength; not for pardon only but for renewal." Amen.