

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Feast of the Epiphany; 6 January 2018
Epiphany Seattle – Todd Foster

God's Fingerprints

In nomine...

I. Isaiah

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon **you**,
and his glory will appear over **you**.
Nations shall come to **your light**,
and kings to the brightness of **your dawn**.*

This prophecy from Isaiah came at a dark time in Israel's history. The prophet Isaiah writes to a people experiencing oppression, exile, and slavery. Their society, their culture, their religion have been smashed. They have been uprooted from their homes and their communities, and plopped down into foreign lands. They are involuntary immigrants and reluctant refugees. Their very identity has been erased and, with the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, their connection to God has been lost.

Isaiah responds to the people's loss with a message of hope. God, who has seemed absent, will soon be present again. God will manifest God's self in the people's midst, if only they have eyes to see. Israel has been a people in captivity, and Isaiah promises they will trade places with their captors: the world order will be inverted, the tables will be turned. The nations will bring you tribute and those who oppress you now will serve you instead.

God did rescue Israel from their captivity: you can read about it in later books of the Bible like Ezra and Nehemiah. But Israel never did achieve a soul-distorting turning of the tables. God did not return tit-for-tat to those who had oppressed God's people. God did not enable Israel to

become an imperial power like those who had been over them, as might have seemed just. Not everyone was able to recognize the marks of God's saving activity. When God fulfills God's promises, God does so in surprising ways.

II. Gospel

Tonight's Gospel reading, the event we gather to celebrate tonight with the Feast of the Epiphany, constitutes a further, stranger fulfillment of Isaiah's promise! A company of magi, religious practitioners who were definitely NOT Jewish, shows up in Palestine riding camels and bearing gifts. They seem to answer in concrete form the prophecy of Isaiah, bringing the wealth of other nations: gold and frankincense as promised explicitly by Isaiah, and some myrrh as well! They came to worship Jesus, a Jewish child of no particular prominence, the son of a carpenter. Expectations of imperial tribute are subverted into a gentle gift offered once to a tiny child. God's promise spoken through the prophet Isaiah is fulfilled once more, and once more in a surprising way.

Epiphany is the Feast on which we mark the surprising manifestation of God in the flesh not to Jews only but also to Gentiles like most of *us*. These Gentiles, these exotic magi whose religious practice centered on the study of stars, had discerned, through their own practices and life experience, that this child was someone important, someone worthy of worship, someone who would change their lives. The magi recognized God was doing something new, making God's self known, becoming manifest, in Jesus. The gifts they brought to the Holy Family were not merely gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but also their experiences of God and their understanding of who Jesus was. The former gifts may have helped Jesus' family as they became political refugees in Africa; but it was the latter gifts that Mary chose to treasure in her heart. From these Gentiles, the magi, the blessed virgin Mary learned about who her son was and what it might mean for him to be the savior of the world. From the Magi, Mary learned to see the *fingerprints* of God.

III. God's Fingerprints

At Epiphany parish, we look to scripture, liturgy, and relationships to teach us about God. These things teach us about how God acts in our world and in our lives. By examining the writings of those who went before us, or the experiences of those around us, our minds become attuned to common themes like Resurrection, Redemption, Abundance, Faithfulness, and Grace: themes which are characteristic both of God and the world which God created. These are God's fingerprints, the surprising ways that God operates in the world. It takes practice to learn to recognize them. As we learn to think naturally that the Kingdom of God is "this close," that the world is a perfectly safe place to be, and that relationship is primary, as our own minds are formed and reformed by these ideas, as we experience repentance and transformation, we learn to think in terms of these themes and thus to recognize God's fingerprints, God's activity among us.

It's like when I was a teenager and a friend at school began driving an old VW Superbeetle he had restored. I was fascinated by it! Suddenly, I saw air-cooled VW's on the road everywhere! They had always been there, but now my mind was ready and eager to notice them. Suddenly I had eyes to see.

God's fingerprints, the eternal ideas we learn from scripture, liturgy, and relationships, are scattered throughout the world liberally if only we have eyes to see. As we become skilled at recognizing the surprising ways in which God fulfills God's promises, we learn to recognize God's fingerprints even in the words and rituals and experiences of strangers. We are then able to embrace others because we see God's fingerprints in them, precious treasures that enrich our own lives of faith.

IV. Madrona

God continues to fulfill God's promises in surprising ways. Pilgrims from Epiphany are among those nations streaming into Jerusalem this very night, though because Jerusalem is literally on the other side of the world, it is morning there. Our pilgrims are bringing with them their tourist dollars and their pilgrim's hearts. These are the treasures that sustain the economy of modern Jerusalem. God's promise spoken through the prophet Isaiah is being fulfilled once more, and once more in a surprising way. We are a part of that fulfillment. We are bearers of God's fingerprints.

Epiphany Parish is itself another Jerusalem, another place where God is fulfilling God's promises in surprising ways. Nestled in the heights of Madrona, on the east edge of Seattle, we manifest the Christ, the savior of the world, the loving, vulnerable presence of God. We are a shining light, a beacon for all to see. And I hope you've noticed what I've witnessed: strangers, people we've not met before, come into our midst nearly every week. They come like the magi, bringing with them their own religious practices and life experience. They come bringing their own history with God. They come to us as gifts from God, entrusted to our care and us to theirs. We are not left to stagnate, but in relationship with others we are each drawn ever more deeply into our shared life with God. God's promise spoken through the prophet Isaiah continues to be fulfilled, and always in surprising ways.

On the Feast of Epiphany we join together to celebrate a feast of the church, and also the fact of our own parish's existence. We celebrate the history of who we have been, who we are now, and who we shall be in the future. We recognize those who have been members here for their whole lives, those who have arrived to live among us more recently, and we anticipate those who will come to be with us in the future. Here at Epiphany, our job is to be a community that sees and thrills and rejoices in the Kingdom of God and the praise of the Lord. By being, just by being who we are, we will attract kindred souls, magi and wise women and wise men to come be among us. So God's promise spoken through the prophet Isaiah will continue to be fulfilled in us:

*Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.*