

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 8, 2009

Lessons: Psalm 147:1-12, 21c; Isaiah 40:21-31; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

Today is the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany. It is the season of the Church Year where we focus on the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the world. We think of the shepherds coming from the hills near Bethlehem to acknowledge the baby lying in a manger. And we think about the wise men, the Magi, traveling a great distance to pay homage to the same baby.

But we also think of our role, over two thousand years later. And we think of light, of candles and of our call to invite others to “come and see.” The Season of Epiphany is a time “*in which we are called ‘to show or to exhibit’ Jesus as Savior to the world*”. It is a season where we share Jesus Christ with the world around us. But how, we might ask, do we do that?

Think about sharing your faith, and listen to Scottish Professor of New Testament, William Barclay:

“There is a great truth... which is at once an inspiration and an awful warning—every ‘one of us’ is an open letter for Jesus Christ. Every Christian, whether ‘they’ like it or not, is an advertisement for Christianity. The honour of Christ is in the hands of his followers. We judge a shopkeeper by the kind of goods he sells; we judge a craftsman by the kind of articles he produces; we judge a Church by the kind of men ‘and women’ it creates; and therefore ‘people’ judge Christ by his followers. Dick Sheppard, after years of talking in the open air to people who were outside the Church, declared that he had discovered that ‘the greatest handicap the Church has is the unsatisfactory lives of professing Christians.’ When we go out into the world, we have the awe-inspiring responsibility of being open letters, advertisements, for Christ and his Church.”

In the book “Growing in Christian Faith” there is another valuable concept that is worth thinking about. It says:

“The proof of Christianity always lies in facts. It is doubtful if anyone has ever been argued into Christianity by verbal proofs and logical demonstrations. The proof of Christianity is that it works, that it does change ‘people’, that it does make bad ‘people’ good, that it does bring to ‘people’ the Spirit of God. It is when a ‘person’s’ deeds contradict ‘their’ words that the gravest discredit is brought on Christianity; ‘but’ it is when a ‘person’s’ words are guaranteed by ‘their’ deeds that the world is presented with an argument for Christianity which will ‘tolerate’ no denial.”

As we seek to share Christ with others, how we live our lives each day is very important.

So let me ask you a question. When people look at us, do they see the same level of confidence that we heard this morning in the reading from Isaiah? Do our lives and our words reflect the same type of trust in God that we heard expressed? How often do we take time to really reflect on the hope and courage that words like these can give to us, and...to those that we know? How often do we take the time to let these verses sink deep into the fibers of our faith, of our souls?

This week, take the insert with you, and re-read the words from Isaiah a few of times. And be sure to read the opening questions. Think about these opening words as being addressed to you, and read them with a bit of inflection:

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?”

And then read and think about the words that follow. See if your sense of peace and hope and courage are not deepened. It is worth doing.

But the reading from Isaiah also raised another consideration that we would benefit from looking at for a few moments. So let me ask you another question, a very serious question. And let’s apply this question both to you, personally, and let’s also apply it to someone that you know. What do you do, and what do you say to someone else, when the bottom seems to fall out of life? You have faith. You know what you are “supposed” to do and you believe that you have been doing it, at least you have been trying. But for some unknown reason, things do not seem to be getting any better. In fact, you have reached the point where you express what we heard the Israelites express in Isaiah:

“My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my god”?

When either you or someone you know, has clearly reached a very desperate point in their life’s journey. What are you to do? What can you do for the other person? Perhaps these words by The Reverend Angela Askew can help. Addressing our reading from Isaiah she writes:

“This’ Isaiah reading ...shows the prophet encouraging his despondent hearers. It was a long moment of great crisis for our ancestors, who continued to live in exile away from the Land of Promise, without Temple or monarchy, and under the rule of a foreign, pagan people. Isaiah wants his hearers to know that their God is a lot bigger than they seem to think he is. Not only is God the maker of their covenant relationship, the maker and savior of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the savior manifest in the mighty acts of the Exodus, the God of Moses, the God of David, and so on; their God is also the Creator and maker of the universe.”

When the bottom falls out of our lives, or the life of someone we know, we each need to remember that the God of the Israelites is **our** God also. And perhaps we need to remember and share these words from today’s lesson:

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

Isaiah’s hearers are instructed to “wait for the Lord.” By “waiting,” Isaiah means trusting, even when things look hopeless we are still to trust this God. Do you need to hear those words today? Does someone that you know?

Our lives will not always be easy, they will not always be happy, and they will not always make sense. So in addition to “waiting, to “trusting”, is there something else that we can do that might help us? It seems so, and two things come to mind.

First, in today’s Psalm we heard: *“How good it is to sing praises to our God! How pleasant it is to honor him with praise!...Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving;...”* The psalmist encourages us to offer our praise and thanksgiving to God. There is an excellent book by Merlin Carothers entitled *“Prison To Praise”*. In the book Carothers very effectively recounts how his life and the lives of several others were dramatically changed by offering praise and thanksgiving to God. Praise and thanksgiving... for both the good times *and* the bad times.

The second thing that we can do when times are challenging comes from this morning’s Gospel. We heard: *“In the morning, while it was still very dark, ‘Jesus’ got up and went out to a deserted place, and prayed.”*

William Barclay has written”

“Now Jesus knew well that he could not live without God; that if he was going to be forever giving out, he must be at least sometimes taking in, that if he was going to spend himself for others, he must constantly summon spiritual reinforcements to his aid. He knew that he could not live without prayer.”

In his classic Christian book, *“Abundant Living”*, famed missionary Stanley Jones reminds us that Jesus went out into the mountain to pray, ‘as was his custom’. Jones then described where each of us can also receive the strength to live the abundant life. He wrote:

“... ‘to live an abundant life’, you will need resources...you will need to ‘refill and replenish.’ This will be done in the Quiet Hour... Your Quiet Hour will help you hear God’s standard notes. Then you can tune up your flattened notes to His. Keep that Hour intact...Certain hours do not belong to the day—they are out. They belong to the getting of resources for the day. If I let down those hours, the day lets down with them.”

This week, let's each commit to doing a couple of things. First, let's strengthen our foundation of faith by re-reading the words from Isaiah in the insert. Let's really think about them and allow them to touch our lives, our faith.

Second, as we live out our lives of faith, let's remind ourselves and someone who is hurting, of the importance of "waiting"...of trusting, even when things seem hopeless. . "Waiting" for understanding and power and strength. Strength to run and not be weary, strength to walk and not faint. Strength...God's strength. And while "waiting" let's remember to offer praise and thanksgiving ...for both the good and the challenging times.

And finally, to enable each of us to live an abundant life, let's each re-commit to maintaining our daily Quiet Times. Let's be sure that each day we allow time for God. Time for God to touch us and to teach us, to comfort us and to strengthen us, time to mould us.

AMEN