

A Sermon for 3Ephiphany

Sunday, January 26, 2014 – Matthew 4: 12-23

Repent...for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!

I have been musing about the notions of blessing and curse...because oh, my, we have been blessed by and in and through the scripture this morning! And I've decided that blessing is so real and tangible and filled with grace, while curse is, more often than not, a tongue-in-cheek and even light-hearted way to rise above our mistakes and misfortunes. We aren't very serious when we say we are cursed with two left feet. Or cursed with a poor memory. Or cursed with no sense of direction. Looking out the window this morning...well, maybe for just a minute or two that snow...again...did feel a bit like a curse. But here we are! Those of us who wanted to come to church...and could...and did. A blessing. And in the always-delightful way that is God's grace, we have heard Scripture that just wraps us right up in warmth and hope. Scripture that speaks blessing upon blessing instead of curse.

In this season of the church we call Epiphany – the season of light – the season that celebrates the coming of the True Light into the world – we are bathed in God's light from the very beginning of today's readings. From the words in Isaiah, praising God who multiplies the nations and increases their joy; who breaks the yokes of our burdens, and shines light on all who walk in darkness.

The Psalmist says, with the Lord as my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? This is the Lord who shelters us in our troubles, who hides us in God's tent for our own safety, who sets us high upon a rock so nothing can harm us.

Even crusty old Paul who, after what appears to be a senior moment in which he cannot remember – exactly – who he has baptized, is scolding the Corinthians, not because they have become a curse to his patience, but because he does not want them to forget that the Real Thing is the real thing. It is not who or what in Corinth should be large and in charge, but the Light of the World that matters.

Light, and light, and light...gifts of God...blessings of love and shelter, illumination and protection...of burdens lightened...of joy.

The reading from Matthew covers a lot of detail in a few verses. It begins with a bit of both history and geography...transitioning from John to Jesus, and locating Jesus in a place. Next come the words from Isaiah, prophecy from the Hebrew Scriptures, familiar to the time. And then another story of Jesus, the True Light, walking among the people. Calling them – as we are called – to follow.

And in the middle of it all, we are told, "from that time" Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Repent...for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

It has been *my* great joy to carry this sentence with me the past few weeks, because, for me it, too, has been wrapped in the delightful grace of illumination. I have been moved from a sense of curse to the gift of blessing. You see, for as long as I can remember, those words evoked in me the mental imagery of a tent-revival preacher...Bible held aloft and shaking...exhorting and, let's be honest, scaring the bejeebers out of the people gathered to give it up on all their sinful ways, right now, because God was breathing down their necks. If I weren't such a self-conscious sort,

I'd act out this little scenario for you, but I am, so I won't. I am sure you can conjure up the image for yourself. I suppose the seed of this mental film clip was probably planted sometime in my childhood. I have no idea from whence it came. But it signified to me a wrathful, vengeful, threatening God, who was shouting an impossible and very immediate ultimatum.

Somehow, in the context of our gospel reading from this morning – set right there as the connector between the quote from Isaiah that tells us of God's gift of light to those in darkness and the narration of Jesus' call to the disciples, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" didn't feel so threatening...Perhaps, all this time, I had misunderstood. Perhaps, in my own growing relationship with a God whom I have come to know as loving, caring, forgiving, it was time to bring these words into the light, and see what was revealed. Perhaps, it was time to change my mind.

Repent, the dictionary tells us, means 'to feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin.' That we understand...and that we do...or at least it should be our intention when we confess our sins. There is another word in the English language that comes closer than "repent" to a direct translation from the Koine Greek in which these words were set down. That word is *metanoia*, which came into usage in the late 19th century and is defined as a change in one's way of life resulting from penitence or spiritual conversion. The nuance, if we can call it that, is huge...we have moved from expressing remorse at our wrongdoing, to changing our way of life. And, if we were to trace this word – and all that it conveys – back to its beginnings, we find *metanoiēn*...a verb that means "to come to a new mind."

Out of *my* mind flew the revivalist preacher, and into my mind – and my heart – came the image of Jesus, walking in the sand on the shore of a lake where common, everyday fishermen – folks like you and me – were going about their business. We do not know how Jesus introduced himself. We do not know how long, nor what course, their conversation took. But we *are* told the message that Jesus proclaimed from the beginning of his ministry. I can imagine him throwing out his arms as if to embrace all that surrounded them, and saying, "See all this with new eyes and hear all this with new ears. Take it all in with a new mind and a new understanding, because this – all of this – is the kingdom of heaven, and God has given it to you!"

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near."

What happens when we look at the world around us – when we try to see it with a 'new mind' – to see it as the kingdom of heaven? It is one of the blessings, and one of the true challenges of our human nature, to be able to see things anew...to hear things differently with 'the ear of our heart'...to change our minds. When we look around *this* space, or the places we live, or the community we call home, we see the goodness and grace of the loving and supportive faces of friends, the shelter and safety of our dwellings, the reassurance that we will not want for that which we need. It is not difficult, in these things, to see the kingdom of heaven, as we imagine it, is *well* at hand. It is not difficult to count our blessings – despite the fact that we too often relegate that accounting to some Sunday morning prayers and one November holiday. That we too often forget to "praise God, from whom ALL blessings flow."

Even when we look farther afield, we find goodness...living in a nation of prosperity...in communities with schools and medical facilities and, most of the time, clean water...in an age when we can travel to far-flung locales to see, firsthand, the amazing beauties of nature or the historic creations of art and architecture wrought by human hands. This speaks of a goodness that surely is the kingdom of heaven come near.

But no one can deny that – however painful, however disturbing, however confusing – if the kingdom of heaven has come to us, it has to be all of what we see...all that we do not want to see...all that we wish we did not have to see. How can the kingdom of heaven be seen and heard in the sorrow of the grieving, in the desolation of the lonely, in the desperation of the afflicted and the addicted? How can it be found in the ravages of poverty, the suffering of the starving, the lives destroyed by war and violence in our world, in our cities, in our schools, in our seats of power?

The kingdom of heaven on earth should be a tapestry of **whole** cloth, weaving together all of God's children, all of nature, heaven and earth, stars, sky and sea – wrought by the Great and Eternal Artist who formed it – formed us – all. And so it *was* created. The great blessing and great responsibility given to humankind to see and hear in new ways – in any and every given moment to have a new mind – to change our lives as we change our thoughts - is too often ignored. And in our ignorance, our stubbornness, our self-concern, it is mankind that chews the moth holes in the tapestry. We, in *our* weakness, weaken the threads to the point of breaking. We, in our brokenness and, yes, in our sin, keep tearing the cloth in shreds.

And God, in an infinite wisdom we cannot begin to comprehend does not swoop in and undo what we have done. God is not an omnipotent fairy godmother waving a magic wand, nor – in a more contemporary context – does God press the cosmic reset button so that we can start all over again. Instead, God loves us and all of creation *so* much that when we grieve, God grieves with us...when we are afraid, God offers shelter...when our burdens are like a yoke pressing down on our necks, God will carry part of the load. God loves us so much that when God's own son became incarnate and dwelled among us, he did not come to fix things by fiat but came to walk and talk with us, to teach us, and to love us all...so that we might learn to walk with, and talk with, to teach and learn from...and, oh yes, to love one another. And he proclaimed that it is **all** right here...the kingdom of heaven. And that we are forever invited to change our minds...to change our hearts...to change our lives...that we might cherish and mend and safeguard the kingdom we have been given.

"We each have more chances than we know to be a daily blessing," Steven Charleston says, "sharing signs of love that, beaded together, make a pattern of hope and touch our common life with beauty, turning a colder world warm with the light of understanding" ...because every moment we are loved by God. Every moment we are forgiven. Every moment we are invited to flourish in the kingdom. All those holes we've managed to chew in the tapestry??? Through them the Son - God's Son - still rises. Through them God's grace still shines. Light, upon light, upon light.