

Scripture Readings and Sermon

December 26, 2021 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Isaiah 60:1-6

Isaiah sets the pattern for all of the prophets. Isaiah begins by pointing out how far society has fallen from what God wants. Next Isaiah illustrates in great detail the negative consequences of that fall and calls for repentance. Acknowledging human sinfulness, Isaiah points out that the majority will be harshly judged. For those that repent and remain righteous, the remnant, God will restore them and bring them home. "Arise!" is a call for the captives in the countries east of Jerusalem to leave their exile and return to the promise land. Their faithfulness and God's powerful restoration will be a light to the nations to also repent and bow before the Lord. Just as Egypt gave its wealth to the Hebrews after the plagues, so will the nations of the East bring valuable offerings to the restored people of Jerusalem. For Christians, however, even though the people came back to Jerusalem, their hearts were still in exile awaiting a savior. Jesus becomes the light that will lead the people and the visit of the Wise Men is used to reinterpret this passage of Isaiah.

Isaiah 60:4 Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters...

Are there family members that you worry about?

Have they lost their faith or fallen into a fade rather than a faith?

Can you see how God is still working in their lives?

Does this passage give you hope?

In what ways can you help to bring them home?

Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12

This text is usually read on January 6th, Epiphany. Epiphany is the twelfth day of Christmas and is traditionally celebrated in Europe with a "King" cake. The regular lectionary text for today would be about a roughly 12 year old Jesus at the Temple. Rather than reading the text out of chronological order, the readings were switched. Sometime after the shepherds visited (Luke) but while the family was still in Bethlehem, the wise men visit. The presentation of Jesus at the temple for circumcision (Luke 2:21) and Mary's ritual purification (Luke 2:22) had most likely already occurred since Matthew writes that the family left Bethlehem soon after the wise men visited. According to Matthew, the family was living in a house (2:11) in Bethlehem. The family may have stayed in Bethlehem up to two years since Herod ordered the death of every infant from two and under. The timing is in question because the time the star appeared is unsure. The star may have begun shining when Gabriel visited Mary, reached the climax at Jesus' birth, and was beginning to wane when the wise men arrived - approximately 18 months which would fit in the two years and under. What is known is that the expensive gifts of the wise men provided the resources for the family to escape Herod and live in Egypt until it was safe to return.

Matthew 2:11 Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Why did an infant need all of these valuable gifts?

Do these gifts match the image of a lowly infant and a poor Mary?

What do you think these gifts mean?

Could they be God's providence providing for the family's exile into Egypt?

How important do you think these gifts were when they found out they had to run?

Commentary on Ephesians 3:1-12

One of the earliest controversies in the Christian church was who did Jesus come to save. For

most of the disciples, the answer was clear. Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. The New Covenant was made during the Passover meal in the context of the Jewish Exodus story. As a result, the church in Jerusalem demanded that all the early male followers be circumcised. This was the importance of Peter's vision at Joppa where God declares what is clean and unclean (Acts 10). While it was Peter who opened the door to the Gentiles through his experience at Joppa (Acts 10-11), Paul is known as the apostle to the Gentiles who reinterpreted Isaiah 49:6 to refer to Jesus as the light to the Gentiles. This mission to the Gentiles can be found as book ends for the Gospel of Matthew which begins with visit by the "Wise Men" from the East and ends with Jesus' command to "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations". It is in today's passage that Paul makes one of his arguments for his ministry to the Gentiles. The message of Grace was not limited to those under the covenant but for all of humanity. This is one of the reasons why Paul emphasizes that Jesus is the new Adam and not a new Moses. Jesus is not a new law giver under an old covenant but is the Savior who by his obedience removes the stain of Adam's disobedience. For Paul, the Law was given to shine a light on humanity's disobedience. The role of the covenant people was to show the nations how far humanity had fallen. Jesus and not the Law, however, is the remedy that will raise humanity back up. Where the Law condemned, the Spirit in Christ gives life. This is the mystery that is revealed - the power of the Holy Spirit to redeem.

Ephesians 3:4 ... enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ.

How do you share your faith?

Is Christ a mystery or a set of religious rituals?

Is sharing your religious habits (Sunday School, worship, etc) the same as Christ?

How has a faith in Christ helped you in the past?

Do you share with others times that God has amazed you?

Reflection on Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12, Ephesians 3:1-12

Sermon "According to Plan"

While I wasn't a big fan of the "A Team" (let's face it, there wasn't much on television), I always remember the catch phrase of at the end when the leader Hannibal would say, "I love it when a plan comes together." Whether in books, movies, or real life, there is something very satisfying when a plan comes together. Maybe it is because plans rarely do. The old saying is, "If you want God to laugh, tell Him your plans". At times it seems like life is more about making up as you go along. Even the best laid plans from Christmas often encounter a 'hitch'. That is probably why people enjoy stories of crazy Christmas like "The Christmas Story" with the dog and the turkey (and the Red Rider BB Gun).

Paul reminds the Ephesians that even though it may be hidden, God does have a plan. In the midst of all of the disappointments and wrong turns we may encounter in life, God does have a plan for every individual. While it may seem far fetched it is never the less true, there has never been nor will ever be another person with the same gifts, skills, and experiences at this point in time like you. Every person has a unique role in the fabric of history. It may not seem important at the time but all actions or in-actions have ripple effects. We can never judge how a kind word or an act of grace will affect someone. God, however, views the entire fabric of time and knows the effects that our interactions can have. It is therefore an amazing gift that God gives us by giving us free will. When we choose our own plan, we may experience brief triumphs which soon fade and forgotten or remembered with regret and horror like the Holocaust. But when we use that free will to follow God's lead, the glory and wonder of God's plan begins to unfold. Through his obedience, Jesus revealed to all including the Gentiles the true beauty and wonder of God's plan. What had been a mystery was now through the gift of the Holy Spirit open to all who have the eyes of faith to see. We no longer have to stumble through the dark but rather the light of Christ reveals the path God has laid out for each of us.

"Arise!" proclaims Isaiah for our light has come. While originally written in the context of the Babylonian exiles, this message is now for everyone who feels lost and stumbling in the dark. Christ,

the Light of the World, has come so that all that was hidden might be revealed. Like a beacon of light, Jesus draws people from all walks of life in every culture. Some are new to the story of Jesus while others are hearing it again as if for the first time. Too often people get Christianity confused with Jesus. Christianity is our human understanding of the revelation of Jesus. We disagree as to what atonement might mean or what it means for Jesus to be Lord of our life because Christ is still ultimately a mystery since, in the Trinity, Jesus is God. We have created, reformed, and recreated various denominations within the Christian religion. Each variation of Christianity attempts to connect the current culture to the Christ child. Sometimes those attempts fall short and actually become obstacles in people's relationship with God in Jesus. During Christmas time, many parents and grandparents worry about their children's relationship with God. Some children have stopped going to church or even started trying another faith tradition. Some have become bored with the way the story is told and others have valid problems in the way doctrine is practiced. And yet, Isaiah says that Jesus will gather our sons and daughters back to home. Our faith is not in a religion or a denomination but in God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is God who calls and it is Jesus who encounters those who are called. In God's plan, no one will be lost or abandoned. No one will be left behind.

In the great scope of God's plan, we can often feel insignificant. God, however, is both in the larger plan and in the details. While some focus on the symbolism of the gift of the wise men and other the offerings of wealth to a heavenly king, the gifts can also be seen as God's providence. God not only has a plan but also equips us for that plan. God knew Herod's heart and how he would react when news of a new king eventually reached Herod. Mary and Joseph would be refugees in a foreign land with a infant. Far from the support system of their family and the network of craftsmen who would employ Joseph, they would be in Egypt without any obvious means of survival. That is until the wise men appear with the gifts. These gifts provided the family with currency valid throughout the Mediterranean. God provided exactly what Mary and Joseph needed in order to keep Jesus safe and healthy. We are not only part of God's plan which will eventually reunite everyone but God provides for us each day along the path of that plan. The trick is walking one step at a time along that path but that is for next week.