

From the December 4 and January 4, 2008, Issues

## **Epiphany Year B**

### **Epiphany Sunday**

Isa. 60:1-6 – Ps. 72:1-7, 10-14 – Eph. 3:1-12 – Matt. 2:1-12

In Epiphany we experience God keeping his promise to bless Abraham so that all the peoples of earth will be blessed through him (Gen 12). The ultimate Israelite vision is not simply to have a relationship with God, but also to see that relationship expanded to include the whole world. “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn... they all gather together, they come to you... the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels... shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD” (Isa 60.3-6). Israel crowned her kings with the words: “May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service” (Ps 72.11).

These prophetic words find literal fulfillment in the wise men who come from the East to pay homage to Israel’s King Jesus, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Mt 2.1,11). And these words are ultimately fulfilled as the knowledge of the Lord covers the earth as the waters cover the sea. This is the knowledge that not only has God kept his promise to Israel, but that “the Gentiles have become fellow heirs” (Eph 3.6). And what are these “boundless riches of Christ” which are now given to the whole world? The gift of God to Israel and to all people is the rich life of “boldness and confidence” that the Son has with his Father. The adopted life itself is the treasure chest that has opened “in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him” (Eph 3.11-12).

### **Second Sunday after Epiphany**

I Sam. 3:1-10, (11-20) – Ps. 139:1-6, 13-18 - 1 Cor. 6:12-20 - John 1:43-51

Today, the God of Abraham is manifesting (epiphany-ing) himself to the world. Today—along with Samuel, Philip, and Nathanael—we find ourselves confronted with the compelling and unexpected Word of God. At first “Samuel did not yet know the LORD” (1 Sam 3.7), but then the LORD spoke, and nothing was ever the same again. One moment, Nathanael is slacking off under a fig tree. Then the Word of God speaks, and he is undone in the presence of the Son of God, the King of Israel (Jn 1.48-49). The Triune One knows us better than we know ourselves; he interacts with us in ways too deep to understand (Ps 139).

And yet, these interactions are only the beginning trickle of a flood of shared life: “You will see greater things than these... You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (Jn 1.50-51). Human interaction with God was once rare (1 Sam 3.1). But now in Jesus, human knowing of God is as unlimited as the Son’s knowing of the Father. We are not merely ‘close’ to the Lord; our very bodies are now his dwelling place (1 Cor 6.13,19).

We “united to” him and “one spirit with him” (6.16-17).

We celebrate our intimate knowing with God in the Epiphany season. Because to experience oneness with God is to be set free, like Paul, to “not be dominated by anything” (6.12). To experience this epiphany—to realize that God has united himself to us forever—is to know the truth that sets us free.

### **Third Sunday after Epiphany**

Jonah 3:1-5, 10 - Psalm 62:5-12 - 1 Cor. 7:29-31 - Mark 1:14-20

Jesus proclaimed the gospel: “The kingdom of God is at hand” (Mk 1.15). In Jesus the Triune persons have incarnated their shared life in the world. How does a rational person respond to such news? Simple: “Repent and believe.” Because a New Order of Things has begun, one which relativizes all other regimes.

To be confronted by the epiphany (manifestation) of God’s kingdom is to have one’s reality re-shuffled in unpredictable ways. A fisherman walks away from his net (Mk 1.18). A nationalist racist prophet finds himself [eventually] preaching to foreigners (Jonah 3.1-3). Pagans end up fasting in sackcloth (3.5). “Those who buy” start living “as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.” Why? Because “the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor 7.30-31).

The old order has no future; it makes no sense for us to place our hope in its already-vanquished gods. The new order has established itself in our midst and is now revealing itself by the Spirit, who eternally calls us to repent and believe the truth that we are God’s children.

### **Fourth Sunday after Epiphany**

Deut. 18:15-20 - Psalm 111 - I Cor. 8:1-13 - Mark 1:21-28

Our world is full of principalities, powers and authorities. Some oppose God, some submit to Him, most are somewhere in between. Some are easy to see—kings, presidents, CEO’s, pastors, the Department of Motor Vehicles. Some are abstractions of collective humanity—democracy, racism, communism, religion. The human experience throughout history also includes other ‘powers’ that are harder to grasp—invisible personal forces like the “unclean spirits” we meet in Mark’s gospel (Mk 1.23-24). “In fact,” Paul says, “there are many gods and many lords” (1 Cor 8.5).

Whatever we understand these ‘gods’ to be, the gospel is that they are under the feet of Jesus: “He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him” (Mk 1.27). Jesus’ authority over them is as evident as Yahweh’s authority over the many false gods we meet in Israel’s history. This power is not only over false gods but also over their false prophets: “Any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods...that prophet shall die” (Deut 18.20). Yahweh epiphanies himself in Jesus as the God above all gods. “The works of his hands are faithful and just...He sent redemption to his people...Holy and awesome is his name!” (Ps 111.7-9).

### **Fifth Sunday after Epiphany**

Isa. 40:21-31 - Psalm 147:1-11, 20 - 1 Cor. 9:16-23 - Mark 1:29-39

God's self-revelation has taken a journey of unthinkable distance—from God to us. But wait! How could this revelation have gotten to us? There is a bottomless chasm between the holy God and sinful humanity. Right? In fact, if God's self-revelation has arrived at our doorstep, there is only one explanation: The chasm has already been bridged, apart from any act of obedience or belief on our part. The fact that God has revealed himself to us means that he also has reconciled us to himself. One cannot be without the other.

This is what makes the good news so good. It's the news that our mortal Adamic wound has been healed, and that this healing is now taking effect all over the world. It heals Simon's mother-in-law, freeing her to serve (Mk 1.31). The truth of the gospel exposes lies and shuts the mouths of liars (1.34). Truth frees Paul so thoroughly that, in order to further proclaim the gospel of freedom, he makes himself a slave to all (1 Cor 9.18-19). Isaiah breathlessly reports the good news: "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?" (Isa 40.21). In Jesus, God is doing what God does: He "brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing... He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless" (40.23,29). In short, "He is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting" (Ps 147.1).

### **Sixth Sunday after Epiphany**

2 Kings 5:1-14 - Psalm 30 - 1 Cor. 9:24-27 - Mark 1:40-45

We are relationally diseased people. Deep in our flesh lives a dysfunction that alienates us from each other and from our own selves as children of the Father. We can call this dysfunction 'uncleanness.'

Throughout the biblical story, the disease of leprosy is emblematic of uncleanness. The contagion separates its victim from others, even while it eats away at his flesh. Naaman "a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy," and it separated him from his troops and his career as a commander (2 Kings 5.1). The lepers of Jesus' day were required by law to shout "Unclean! Unclean!" as they walked down the street, to warn people to stay away. Like them, we are all sick in ways that isolate us. But the gospel is that our disease/alienation has been penetrated by One who is infectiously whole. Health Himself became flesh and dwelt among us. He spoke his word: "Be made clean!" and it was so (Mk 1.41).

We rejoice with the Psalmist: "O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me... You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy!" (Ps 30.2,11). From this healing we learn "there is indeed a prophet in Israel" (2 Kings 5.8). It is by knowing this prophet that we are made whole (*Greek σοζο: healed, saved*). To know the prophet, to be whole, to experience life as an adopted son—*This* is the imperishable wreath Paul desires more than anything (1 Cor 9.25). It is because of this consuming desire that he so strenuously (even athletically!) avoids ways of thinking and living that darken his knowing of Christ

(9.27). Along with him, we hear the call: “Wash and be clean” (2 Kings 5.13). We are washed by the water of the Word, the gospel of our inclusion in the Son’s life with the Father.

### **Transfiguration Sunday**

2 Kings 2:1-12 - Psalm 50:1-6 - 2 Cor. 4:3-6 - Mark 9:2-9

Einstein used to say “God does not wear his heart on his sleeve,” meaning that the true nature of reality is rarely obvious at first glance. In biblical terms we can say that reality is veiled, waiting to be unveiled (*Greek: apocalypsed*). “The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor 4.4).

How can we see reality without seeing the incarnate Christ, the One in whom the universe lives, moves and has its being? We can know things truthfully only if the veil of unbelief is removed (4.3). Still, our faith is not blind. In the incarnation, the Secret of the universe has laid himself out on our lab table. Our eyes have beheld him; our hands have touched him. The gospel of Epiphany is that the Triune God is now made manifest: “God shines forth!” (Ps 50.2). On the mountaintop with Jesus, the disciples learn that, as great as Elijah and Moses were, *they* are not the key to understanding all things. The Father’s voice makes this plain: “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to HIM!” (Mk 9.9). “The God who said ‘Let there be light’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4.6).

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