

3 Epiphany Year A 2011

If I'm remembering the year and the season correctly, it was about 2003 during the summer when I traveled from the cool climes of the San Francisco Bay area to humid and very hot climes of Texas in order to attend a weeklong conference offered by the Episcopal Church. This conference was about growth and development for small congregations and it was led by The Rev. Ben Helmer. I was excited to meet Ben because I had gotten to know his son Richard during our time together in seminary. In seminary I managed our guest housing which was right next to the chapel and Richard would frequently practice the piano in the chapel and the sounds of his beautiful music would turn an average moment of any day into a magical amazing concert. Richard is a pianist with extraordinary gifts and I loved to listen when he played. Richard continues to serve as a priest in the San Francisco area and his father Ben Helmer is presently serving as the vicar of St. James' Episcopal Church, in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, a small tourist town in the mid-South.

Ben has been serving the Episcopal Church for a long time and he is a wise and seasoned leader so I am happy to share some of his advice with us this morning about how "Proclaiming the Good News is not something left only to individual evangelists; it is in fact the task of the entire church. Yet, we are often led to believe and act as though only individuals can tell the story of Jesus. Epiphany is a season about proclamation and the power of God at work in God's people, to be sure; but it is also a season when the church examines its life and witness and how it understands itself to be the incarnated Christ planted in a local community.

In today's Hebrew scripture from Isaiah, and in the gospel, there are echoes of Advent:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness –
on them light has shined.

In a small tourist town in the mid-South it is now winter; unemployment is high and there's not much money in anyone's pocket. A church decides to offer Sunday night suppers for the community, and local restaurateurs offer to prepare the food – all donated. As one chef said, "This is why I go to church," and he and his fellow chefs generously donate good food each week to feed anyone who shows up between 4 and 6 p.m.

This is the light that shines in a land of deep darkness, and it is part of the gospel of Jesus, part of the Good News for folks who are living in the gloom of unemployment and the dark and cold of winter.

In another community, a church offers income-tax assistance to the elderly at no charge; still another decides to help people with special needs to pay their monthly bills and combines bill-paying times with a meal at the church.

These are tasks that can't be done by individuals, but a congregation can easily develop a significant ministry of light that makes a difference.

Epiphany is a time of recognition; the recognition that Jesus Christ is present, "incarnate" as we church folks sometimes say, born into the world, made flesh, affirming our humanity. That's the main theme of Epiphany.

There is also another theme: that of repentance, which again is an echo of John the Baptist's preaching and an anticipation of Lent.

Repentance is often thought of as private, personal, nobody else's business, between us and God alone. Well, repentance also has a corporate nature to it. In the reading from First Corinthians today, we hear Paul chiding those who have divided loyalties. He points out to the Corinthians, and to us, how this mocks the Good News. A church that is divided is not a witness to the gospel, and is subject to public ridicule. One parishioner in a conflicted church tried to keep the lid on the trouble, saying, "We don't air our dirty linen in public," only to find the "dirty linen" was already in the public awareness.

Saint Paul knew the devil to be at work here, and that division was the antithesis of proclamation.

So, we find Epiphany a time of witness and repentance, personal and corporate. The readings today underscore both, and challenge us to set aside our petty differences so that the church can be a place not of sloppy agreement, but of vitality. Conflict drains the energy out of any organization, churches included. Our job is to look outward, to see the opportunities for mission and engage in them. That is how we proclaim the Good News to a community, and that is how we avoid pettiness and conflict.

In addition to witness and repentance, we find a third theme of Epiphany: the call. Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, finds Simon Peter and Andrew and simply says, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

Is our church a place where people can discover their call? Are there ministries in which everyone can participate? Is our church multi-dimensional: inward and spiritual, outward and mission-focused, focused on the ones yet to come rather than only on those who are already in the fellowship? Creating a place for new people is often creating a place for people to be called, just like the chef who discovered he could use his talents on Sunday nights to cook food for others.

Epiphany is often a time for annual parish meetings. These meetings are frequently dreaded by clergy, endured by laity, and concluded with a feast of relief. The lessons for today are a forceful reminder that these meetings ought to be times when the church takes council for mission. They should never be times of complaint or hand-wringing over budget deficits. The community can benefit from being recalled to its mission, just as though it were Jesus coming by and saying, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

That call should be at the center of everything we do, every time we meet. When the call to follow Jesus is the agenda, then we will discover that any church, regardless of its size, average attendance, or age, can be a place of Good News. Amen.

