

“EPIPHANY AS RESISTANCE”

Psalm 72; Matthew 2:1-12

Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

The Reverend Thomas A. Sweet

January 7, 2018 - The Epiphany of the Lord Sunday

Both versions of our psalm this morning - spoken and sung - express the heart of the Epiphany of the Lord so well that, as Christians began to read the psalms, Psalm 72 was accorded the title of “the Epiphany psalm.”

We talked the last time I preached about the importance of taking scripture first of all in its original context. While original setting sometimes are difficult to discern with certainty, there is general agreement among biblical scholars that Psalm 72 is a prayer for help and guidance for the king to carry out the duties of his office faithfully and probably refers to King Solomon, King David’s son.

But as the church of Jesus Christ came into being, it became an acceptable practice to read the psalms in the light of Christ. Most of the psalm texts we sing from our hymnbook are infused with this latter interpretation. Thus, in our psalm-hymn today we sang of the ministry of “great David’s greater Son,¹ Jesus the Christ: *“You come to break oppression, to set the captive free, to take away transgression and rule in equity. You come with rescue speedy to those who suffer wrong, to help the poor and needy and bid the weak be strong.”*² *“You give them songs for sighing, their darkness turn to light...”*³

The psalm is a ringing affirmation that the ministry of Jesus Christ is not business as usual but charts new ways of living and relating in the world. It becomes a foundational call to the church in our time to take *“another road”*⁴ in the way we live and move and have our being. We are to

¹ “All Hail to God’s Anointed,” text by James Montgomery, hymn #149 in Glory to God hymnbook

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ Matthew 2:12

take a way other than complying with any unjust demands and rituals of empire. It is not the wisdom of the world or the spirit of the age or the conventions of the culture we are to follow but the wisdom of God and the Spirit of Christ.

The term I want to apply to taking that alternative route and course of action to which the church is called is *resistance*. In the traditional Epiphany story, Matthew tells of traveling wise men who came to Jerusalem to ask where the child who had been born “king of the Jews” could be found. When King Herod heard about these travelers wanting to pay homage to this newborn, he felt threatened and began immediately to develop a strategy to exterminate all recently born children with the goal of eliminating potential challengers to his reign.

That is how empires and their leaders often work. They consolidate, protect, and do whatever it takes to preserve their power. They do whatever they have to do to retain control no matter how they do it or who they hurt. As Herod did, leaders of empires often try to disguise their deception and depravity. Herod feigned a desire to go to where the Christ Child lay to celebrate his birth and thus commanded the wise men to come back to him with directions. Leaders of empires and those in servitude to them, especially in tenuous and tremulous times as in Herod’s day and ours, mislead, misdirect, obfuscate, confuse, divide, and hide both their ulterior agendas and the truth.

Those, too, who profit from the ways and means of empire and thus collude with it are complicit in diminishing and damaging society and profaning God’s intentions for it. Society is to be the place where all people are able to thrive together. But when systems, laws, and policies of empire conspire against those who are less or not at all privileged; when good people live uncritically or obliviously without much thought for others and their welfare and therefore support the ambitions and abominations of empire, even if unwittingly, people suffer, justice gets compromised, inequality widens, hospitality gets pinched, and hate festers.

In today’s gospel story, through the means of a dream, God warns the travelers not to return to Herod, not to do as the empire demands. Having just seen the Child deemed to be “the light of the world,” they refuse to go back to the dark ways of empire. *Epiphany as resistance*. Perhaps they heard Isaiah’s song:

*Arise, your light is come! The Spirit’s call obey;
show forth the glory of your God, that shines on you today.*⁵

⁵ “Arise, Your Light Is Come!” Text by Mary Louise Bringle. Hymn #744 in Glory to God hymnbook. Also, Isaiah 60: 1.

When we have seen the light, when the light of the Lord shines in us, we are instructed by God not to hide that light under a basket but to let it shine in the midst of the world so that it may give light to all.⁶

The church is called in this and every age to claim and to live into its heritage.⁷ The church began as a community of resistance that stood up to the principalities and powers of its age, of the empire, of all that opposed the ways of God in the world.

*“Not by power nor by might, but by my Spirit,”*⁸ is the way Zechariah records the Lord’s admonition to the people as to how to live.

*“The Lord has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God”*⁹ is the way the prophet Micah says it.

St. Paul writes to his congregation in Rome, *“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil and hold fast to what is good...serve the Lord...contribute to the needs of others and extend hospitality to strangers...bless those who persecute you; bless, and do not curse...rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep...live in harmony with one another...do not be haughty but associate with the lowly...do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all...insofar as it depends on you, live peaceably with all...and do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*¹⁰

A community of resistance trusts God for its life and wisdom. A community of resistance stands against unjust systems, empires, and leaders and stands up for the bruised reeds and the dimly burning wicks of society. A community of resistance resists the stereotyping, ghettoizing, and demonizing of any person or peoples. A community of resistance refuses to be co-opted for any purpose not attuned with the heart of God.

I appreciated very much the following sentence in Meg Shoeman’s sermon last Sunday for the way it speaks of resistance as she talked about her call to be a chaplain, work she starts tomorrow at Children’s Hospital in Birmingham, Alabama: *“The real work of a chaplain, the real work of a Christian, the real work of a lover of God, the real work of a human being is to discern through the cacophony of flood, fire, hurt, hate, grief, loneliness, and loss, the notes by which we*

⁶ Matthew 5:15

⁷ “The Church of Christ in Every Age,” text by Fred Pratt Green. Hymn #320 in Glory to God hymnbook.

⁸ Zechariah 4:6

⁹ Micah 6:8

¹⁰ Romans 12:9ff

may yet sing the Lord's song in a foreign land. This is our dignity and our power, beauty, glory - the gifts of God for the people of God. It is the music by which we join the whole creation."¹¹

Epiphany is for the purpose of sharing the music by which the whole creation is joined together. Epiphany is for the purpose of enabling the whole world to see the light of God. Not Christians only and not ourselves only as individuals, the light of God is, as the prophet says, for "*all flesh to see together.*"¹² I hear the call for us, Market Square Church, to see ourselves in that light as a community of resistance that stands up and against all that would despoil people's lives and even the creation itself. We must be able to say no in order to say yes...yes to all God wills for us and the world, yes to love and generosity, yes to peace.

We are already such a community when we worship God and not the *vain world's golden store*.¹³ We already are such a community when we say no to homelessness and press on toward a solution. We already are such a community when we support the work of the International Service Center helping refugees and immigrants to navigate their ways as they take up residence in this city. We already are such a community when we help a Syrian family to resettle here as some of our members presently are doing. We already are such a community when we purchase "Lights for Gaza" so that our Palestinian sisters and brothers may have illumination in their darkened homes. We already are such a community when we help to found and then support both financially and with personal involvement the work of groups like the Community Responders Network, the Community Check-Up Center, Hospice of Central Pennsylvania, the Homeland Center, and our Korean language ministry, among others..

We already are such a community when persons of any sexual orientation or gender identity can find a home here. We already are such a community when we participate in protest marches, write letters to legislators, and make calls in the corridors of the Capitol on behalf of justice for all people and persons. We already are such a community when we partner with the United Way to provide a free tax assistance ministry so that persons of low income may have returned to them money they are due.

We already are such a community when members gather to discuss books that support our long obedience in a gospel direction. We already are such a community when we pay our staff fairly and provide full benefits in an empire trying to squeeze its workers while enriching upper management. We already are such a community when take the care of the earth seriously

¹¹ Sermon by Meg Shoeman at Market Square Presbyterian Church preached December 31, 2018 entitled "Singing Like a Ringing Bell."

¹² Isaiah 40:5

¹³ Found in the lyrics of the hymn, "Jesus Calls Us," text by Cecil Frances Alexander. Hymn #720 in the Glory to God hymnbook.

enough to do energy audits of our own, old building and to offer ways to walk more softly on the earth.

Donna Wenger, perhaps with an eye on today's sermon title, sent me an article by way of a Ron Poorman Facebook posting (if I understand that trail correctly), that quotes writer and scholar Burke Gerstenschlager commenting on the courage of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church in resisting the misappropriation of Christianity for service to Hitler's empire. It is as true and apt for us today: *"We must resist...with love where there is hate; resist with kindness where there is abandonment; resist with grace where there is cruelty; resist with justice where there is impunity; resist with knowledge where there is ignorance; resist with truth where there are lies."*¹⁴

It is essential for us to understand who we are and the condition by which we are called to give our lives. *"Arise, shine, for our light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon us."* In the name of Jesus Christ, I call us to be Epiphany resisters of all that leads to death and dismay and to be heralds of all that is good and of God. Onward into this new year, my friends, resisting, hoping, praying, loving. Onward!

Amen.

¹⁴ Excerpted from an article by Ed Simon entitled "The Comeuppance for Evangelicals Who Sold Their Souls to Trump Is Coming," available at www.alternet.com.