

Bible Study
Third Sunday after Epiphany, Year A
January 22, 2017

[RCL] Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1, 5-13; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

Isaiah 9:1-4

Transformation is at hand! One might look at this passage as a song of restoration because Isaiah is telling Israel to take heart, as they have lived through a conquest in which the tribal territories of Zebulun and Naphtali were captured (by the Assyrians). But Isaiah is clear that there is even more than restoration ahead: the gloom will vanish, and there will be joy and exultation.

Israel will be saved from the darkness of their oppression. Isaiah tells of their coming liberation from the “yoke of their burden,” which is the “rod of their oppressor,” using a story from their history. He reminds the people of the way Gideon delivered Israel “as on the day of Midian.” Now of course Isaiah is clear about the ultimate source of this generation’s deliverance. We know this because if we read a few lines beyond this passage, Isaiah credits the Lord of hosts with Israel’s delivery.

However, Isaiah also tells us that the people of Israel have a role. Not only will they “see a great light,” but also the light will shine on *them*! In dark times, we all look for hope to sustain us until we can see the great light again. Why might God shine the light on Israel? *What if that light shines on the people because God is showing them that from their own selves can come a way out of desperate times? What if that light is a commissioning?*

- In what way might you be bearing a yoke of oppression in your own life?
- How might you be benefitting from or contributing to the oppression of others?
- In what ways might the Light be shining on you to take responsibility for a way out of darkness? How might you be the fulfillment of God’s promise to someone else?

Psalm 27:1, 5-13

God is an inexhaustible source of strength and courage for the psalmist, the well that never runs dry. Oh, to be swept up in such joy that one’s fondest wish is to drink deeply of it until the end of time! This is a love song to God, and we can feel the *frisson*, our pulse picking up as we fall into ecstatic love with the Divine.

Anyone who has ever been in love will recognize not only the joy in one’s Beloved, but also the desire to express the depth of one’s devotion. But this is not a song to the human love of one’s life: this is a love song to the ultimate – to God! And this Beloved is, for each one of us, our light, our salvation. So, who can be afraid when swept up into love with the most powerful force in the universe? Okay, well maybe we are a little afraid that something will go wrong and we’ll lose it. The psalmist speaks for everyone who has ever been in a state of great love and then said either silently or aloud, ‘please don’t ever leave me.’

“Do not forsake me, O God of my salvation.” But no, not this God. This is the God who will always speak in our hearts and say “Seek my face.” And may we ever do so.

- What does it mean to seek God's face? What does God's face look like to you?
- The psalmist asks that he (or she!) may "dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of [my] life." What does that mean to dwell in the house of the Lord?
- Why are you afraid?

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

It's hard not to read Paul's letter to the Corinthians without thinking of how applicable this message is to any church in the 21st century. Christians are humans and we disagree on many things even within a single denomination. Paul's organization in this letter to the young church in Corinth is so important, first reminding the people that they are brothers and sisters—a family now, and then reminding them in whose name they are united: Jesus.

For the church in Corinth to be strong and healthy, the basis of their unity is in the mind and purpose of Jesus. That's different than urging people to agree with one another in an accord of their own. Paul continuously points to Jesus, telling the Good News, and reminding the people that it's the Good News of Jesus Christ, not of his own ministry. He keeps pointing to the cross because if the people will only look to him, their unity will fall apart when he is not present.

Paul knows that he must pay attention to many places where gentiles will hear his message, because he believes that he *must* invite everyone into the Body of Christ. That is the mission that God has called him to, a mission of inclusivity! Paul powerfully reminds the church members: it's not his (Paul's) church. Nor is it Apollos' nor Cephas' church. The church is the Body of Christ.

- What are some ways in which your church may have disagreements, and how might you come to a meeting of the minds?
- What does Paul mean in V. 18 when he says "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."?
- Paul urges the people to be united and in the same mind and in the same purpose. What is that purpose?

Matthew 4:12-23

Does this look familiar? Matthew shows us the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (today's Hebrew Bible reading) in this passage. Jesus receives the news that John has been arrested, and immediately picks up on John's message of repentance and the nearness of the kingdom of heaven. But Jesus goes beyond John's message, now taking up his ministry in earnest. He knows that he will need a team, and he calls his first four disciples—two sets of brothers. It is especially noteworthy that both sets of brothers are said to have immediately left and followed Jesus. They did not stop to think about it and discern what they should do—when Jesus called, they said "yes," and *immediately* followed him.

So, Jesus and his disciples hit the road throughout Galilee. He did what Jewish men did in the first century when they wanted to worship, receive or give instruction and talk about God; he went to the synagogues. Jesus worked *within* the cultural structure of his time.

But he also went beyond proclaiming the Good News of God's kingdom from the *bema* of a synagogue. Matthew's passage records in Jesus' travels throughout Galilee, he cured "every disease and every sickness among the people." How extraordinary!

- What are some ways in which Jesus has called *you* to follow him? How long did it take you to decide what to do?
- What is the significance of Jesus' healing ministry, and why do you suppose that a distinction is made between "disease" and "sickness"?
- When Jesus, and previously John, say "the kingdom of heaven has come near," what do they mean? Is it spatially near (close by) or temporally near (soon to arrive)?

Written by Pan Conrad. Conrad, a resident of Annapolis, MD, is in the final year of her M.Div. program at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, MA. She is a candidate for Holy Orders in the Diocese of Maryland, and by the time we reach Epiphany 3, God willing and the people consenting, she will have been ordained to the transitional diaconate. Conrad is also an astrobiologist and planetary scientist with NASA.

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