

“Ablaze”

“This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles . . .” So begins today’s Second Lesson. Which leaves us kind of up in the air. *“What is the reason?”* becomes the question that should be forming in our minds. *“Why did you become a prisoner, Paul?”*

It is a problem we run into frequently as we make our way through the Lectionary: lessons begin in mid-thought; the climax of the story is unfolding without necessarily providing the lead-up narrative that make understanding possible; the context is shrouded. Unless you are one of those rare people who has memorized large portions of the Bible, hardly a week goes by when this kind of situation arises with our assigned readings.

We could, of course, abandon the lectionary and read whole narratives. The value, however, in the three-lesson, three year lectionary pattern is that we get to make connections between Old and New Testaments, between the theology of Mark and the theology of Paul — all of which helps to illumine our faith and guide us on our pilgrimage.

But . . . we’re still left with the question this morning: *“What is the reason St. Paul was a prisoner for Christ?”* We turn to the book of Acts for the answer, where we discover that what some commentators call “Judaizers” dogged Paul all along his missionary routes, trying to refute his message of inclusion. They tried (and often succeeded) to drive him out of synagogues, arguing that his Gospel — that the Messiah had come for both Jews and Gentiles — was double apostasy. They fomented riots, leveled charges of insurrection and public indecency against Paul, and in any way they could tried to harass him. But Paul would not abandon his fundamental calling — he knew that Christ Himself had commissioned him to proclaim Good News to the Gentiles.

Which is the very theme of Epiphany Sunday and the entire Epiphany

season. As today's Gospel records, this is the day we celebrate the arrival of the Magi, the Wise Men, in Bethlehem. That event revealed to the early Church the message that God did indeed intend for nations far and wide to be included in His plan of salvation. Up until the arrival of these "visitors from the east," the story of Jesus has had an exclusively Jewish cast — a Jewish virgin girl, a young Jewish carpenter, Jewish shepherds, Jewish townspeople. But now suddenly two non-Jewish groups enter the story — the Magi and King Herod and his court.

The Magi are obviously not from Judea or Galilee; they are from "the east," which does not make them east coast effete liberals, but probably indicates that they came from what today would be Iran. Herod is bothered by the concept of one "born king of the Jews" because he himself, while ruling over the Jewish region, was in fact an Idumean, from the land the Old Testament calls Edom.

On Epiphany Sunday (the actually Day of the Epiphany is Wednesday, January 6), we celebrate that God always had in mind bringing His Gospel of love and peace to the entire world. His kingdom was never, ever conceived to have been exclusively parochial; all nations had always been welcome.

This is a message affirmed by the prophet Isaiah in today's First Lesson: ***"Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn."*** Unfortunately, many people considered that an affirmation that the Wise Men were kings. They were not. They were astrologers; mystic practitioners of Zoroastrianism, a cult of the ancient world that valued the writings of many religions, including Judaism.

But Isaiah did consider that nations and kings (in Isaiah's world there were no democracies; so this is a form of Jewish parallelism, repetition of the same idea using two different forms of expression) would come. In other words, eight hundred years before Christ, God was sending a message that His Kingdom would embrace all peoples. But we can go back further than that — 2,000 years before Jesus Abraham had been called with the covenantal promise: ***"by you shall all the nations of the***

earth be blessed.”

“Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you,” proclaims Isaiah. This was a message of hope spoken to a people who desperately needed to hear a message of hope. The conquest of Jerusalem had been completed. The first wave of deportation had taken place; over the next nine years, more and more of the nation would be carried off to Babylon — first the political rulers, then the people of means, followed by the artisans, merchants, and craftsmen, until nearly ninety percent of the population was removed from the Promised Land.

This was a time of deep sorrow, high anxiety, great anger . . . and questions: Did our God lose to the gods of Babylon? How will we worship without a Temple? What will become of our king? Will we disappear into history? Was everything we held to a lie?

The Exile would prove to be the most shattering event in the history of the nation of Israel. So powerfully faith-destroying and hope-depleting was this event, that the nation was truly “lost.” But God, who had not just allowed this to happen, had in fact caused it to happen, would not leave His people comfortless. Isaiah is but one of many prophets sent in this time to proclaim the message that God was not quite done yet with His Chosen People. *“The time is coming,”* the prophets insisted, *“and not far off . . .”* when God’s people would see God’s power revealed just as it had been when God showed that He had chosen them in the delivery out of Egypt.

I hesitate to compare the times in which we now struggle with those black days of the Exile, because the level of devastation really is not comparable. Except . . . this kind of comes under the concept of *“minor surgery is what is done to someone else.”*

When you are in the middle of some painful event in life, it really does not matter to you that others may have it worse. Pain is pain; and as Lucy Van Pelt in Peanuts attested: *“I don’t like pain. Pain hurts.”* Pain also

isolates. When you have a headache, you want the world to just leave you alone. Some of the worst part of being hospitalized is the fact that, for most of the day, you are left alone. But pain also isolates in that only I can experience my pain. You may have had knee pain; but you have not had my knee pain. Yours may have been worse, or not so bad — doesn't matter. Only I can know my pain.

But whatever the level of pain — and no matter if it's physical, emotional, spiritual, relational — in the midst of pain we can lose hope. Maybe not entirely; maybe we don't fall into despair; but enthusiasm is diminished, the future seems less bright, more distant. So if the situation does not right itself quickly, depression sets in.

As a nation we are moving through some difficult times. People are anxious, rightly so, about the pandemic, the economy, their jobs, their homes, their retirement. What will happen when the moratorium on evictions does expire? Nobody really knows how many people will be without places to live. It is unclear how many foreclosures will hit homeowners, but if you have something other than a conventional mortgage, you will lose sleep. Companies have closed or scaled down at an alarming rate; this past retail season was down sharply; layoffs have been deep, and not yet finished. We may not be facing the Exile that the people to whom Isaiah spoke faced, but it does feel like something has been taken away, carried off, lost.

That feeling carries over to St. Thomas congregation. Fellow-members laid off; friends departed. Nine years of deportation Israel endured. Then thirty years in Exile. We have officially been in a recession for almost a year, and the walloping impact has been felt for the past three, four months. So, I am prophesying that we have another eight years of bad news, followed by thirty years of pain?

No. What I am saying is that we need to take our cues from Isaiah and St. Paul. When we are feeling dark, our only hope is in the light. When we feel like life is setting up obstacles and roadblocks to our path, we need to refocus on our calling. When we think that what lies ahead may be

difficult, maybe even impossible, we can find comfort in the One who sets our path before us.

“Arise, shine,” Isaiah calls to us. Not an easy task when your not feeling particularly bright and cheery; but not impossible, either. What makes it possible is recognizing the source of light is outside you. ***“Your light has come! . . . the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.”*** When the mood is less than sunny, don’t sit in the shadows of your own making, come to the light!

“This is the reason . . . I . . . am a prisoner” — I prefer the translation, ***“For this cause, I . . . am a prisoner . . .”*** Paul knew his calling; that is what kept him moving through some pretty bleak periods. He knew that God was using him, and he wanted to be used of God. He also knew that success or failure, victory or defeat was not in his hands; those were in God’s hands.

The calling of Paul, the message of Isaiah, the arrival of the Magi all come together in this — we, as a congregation, and each of us as followers of Christ, have a calling and a message of hope to deliver to people who have not seen or understood the light of Christ. They are not always going to be people “like us.” We may have no present idea who they could be, much less who they are. So we need to be attentive to the light. We need to keep ourselves readied in our calling.

It may be a neighbor, a co-worker, a friend, a relative, someone we encounter in the doctor’s waiting room, a clerk at the cash register . . . anywhere and everywhere there are people who need the light. They may not be seeking it, or they may hunger for it. They may be ignorant or well-informed. They may not know how to ask or seek after the light.

But you — you must be ablaze with that light, so that it can be seen. You — you need to seize the opportunity to let Christ’s love flow through you at any moment to any person He places in your path. You — you need to be inviting and intentional to seek out people whom you know, or merely suspect, are in darkness.

You — you must give heed to your calling your cause, the message of Good News that you have heard and now are sent to give to others.
You — yes, you!

“Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you . . .”

On this day that the whole Church celebrates the Gospel coming to all who had not known that such Good News could be told — on this Epiphany Sunday — let us together commit to live out our calling. Let us reveal to our community that the light is here — ablaze with the powerful hope that is in Christ Jesus. But be constantly aware — it is not our light that will attract, it is Christ’s.

Let His light be so ablaze in you, that in you He becomes positively luminescent.

Amen.