



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Day of Epiphany January 6, 2019

[RCL] Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7,10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 60:1-6

It's Epiphany! This is the day of the year that we celebrate the Incarnation of God into the person of Jesus Christ. From the Incarnation flows everything else in our faith: the teaching of Jesus Christ, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection. Without the Incarnation, these things do not happen. Part of the power that comes from Epiphany is where it is placed in our liturgical season, for to get to Epiphany, we must go through Advent. We have gone through four weeks of fasting, repentance and darkness to get to the light of Epiphany.

After this "darkness" that will "cover the earth" and "the people," Trito-Isaiah proclaims "Arise, shine; for your light has come!" Most scholars agree that the book of Isaiah is written by three authors, and that the core of this third Isaiah is Chapters 60-62. As Joseph Blenkinsopp points out in "Isaiah 56-66: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary" (Yale University Press, 2003), this core speaks exclusively of salvation, and uncharacteristically of the prophets, there are no denunciations or conditions. In other words, this is a time of celebration. The day spring has come. Our God is with us, and it is now time for cheer and for the gloomy clouds of night to disperse.

Isaiah, as if entering into our Advent, proclaims a message of light and salvation into our dark and gloom.

- One can become accustomed to the dark and gloom after a period in both. How might we be willing to accept the light and salvation of Jesus into our dark and gloom?
- Discuss the feeling of this light entering in and how you are experiencing it.

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

I think this psalm is incredibly useful to us in understanding the environment that Jesus comes to through his birth. This, among other reasons, is why the apostles seem constantly perplexed by Jesus' teachings and actions. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, he is supposed to come in and start judging "with righteousness" and "crush[ing] the oppressor[s]." In more concrete terms, the expectation is that Jesus will come in, drive the Roman Empire out of the Holy Land, and overthrow false kings like Herod the Great. So when we come to Jesus' ministry and he tells people

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to keep his identity a secret while preaching love of enemies, the apostles and the other people of first century Galilee want to know, “What gives?”

However, as we continue reading, we see how the last four verses give us the meaning of Epiphany and tell us “what gives” about Jesus’s ministry. The rulers of Tarshish, Sheba and Seba come to pay homage to the king. These places represent that which is foreign, strange and far away, in much the same way as the Magi when they visit Jesus. Christ, as the king in the psalm does, comes for the “the weak and the needy” and those who experience “oppression and violence,” and the foreigners who came from afar to pay homage are included in this promise. The King, Christ, comes to redeem the lives of all, including those foreign.

- How do you feel about subverting expectations? Have you ever had God answer prayers or do something completely outside of your expectations?

Ephesians 3:1-12

Well, if Jesus subverted some traditional expectations, Paul confused everyone. Paul began persecuting followers of Christ when they first appeared. After having a revelatory experience on the road to Damascus, Paul became one of the most fervent followers of Christ and one of the faith’s most vocal proponents. Then, Paul, a Pharisee trained in a Hellenistic world, says that God called him to bring the faith to the gentiles. A member of one of the most conservative and traditional sects of Judaism wants to bring the faith of the promised Messiah to the Jewish people to those who know nothing of Judaism, the promised Messiah, or Jesus. Let’s just say that Paul raised a few eyebrows with his ministry.

This is a message of hope that Paul brings to the believers in Ephesus, for he says that the promise of relationship and covenant that God has historically promised to the Jewish people since they first heard the story of their patriarch Abraham is now available to all peoples through Jesus Christ. This, plain and simple, is why we should all be excited about Epiphany. The vast majority of us, Christians that is, are not of Jewish heritage, and the reason we know Christ at all is because we were brought in to the salvation story through Christ and told about it through his servant Paul. “Through faith” in God, we now have the “boundless riches of Christ” and the “wisdom of God.” Thanks be to God!

- Do you ever think about your life in Christ within the framework of the covenant given by God to the Jewish people in the Hebrew Bible? What do you think about that?
- In light of this, what do you think about our relationship with our Jewish brothers and sisters? What should it be?

Matthew 2:1-12

The story that we celebrate on this day of Epiphany presents a clear dichotomy between Herod the Great, false king, and Jesus, genuine royalty, according to Ulrich Luz in “Matthew 1-7: A

Commentary” (Fortress Press, 2007). Herod’s fright upon hearing from the Magi in verse 3 is the opposite of the joy that the magi have upon realizing that they will see Jesus soon in verse 10. Herod’s evil plan in verses 7-9 is frustrated by God in verse 12. Even in its structure, this story is meant to undercut Herod while “paying homage” to Jesus. (Interesting note: The verb used here for paying homage, *προσκυνεω*, is only used in reference to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.) This is clearly the story of the gentiles, the magi, coming for a connection with Judaism, for they specifically ask to see “the king of the Jews.”

Now, of course, what we always remember from this story is the star and the magi. Julius Caesar, Augustus and Herod all had stars on their coins to symbolize their kingship. Some theories would like to explain the star using science. Ulrich Luz, for example, points out a Jupiter-Saturn conjunction as one of the explanations. But this misses the point. The point is that God uses a miracle to symbolize God’s son’s kingship and divinity. This miracle shows God’s will in bringing the gentiles into the unfolding salvation plan. The star hanging in the sky is God announcing to the world, “Arise, shine; for your light has come”!

- The story of the magi often gets lost in the mix of the nativity story. What do you think of the story when we see God’s will throughout it in the background?
- Discuss some periods in your life when you look back and can see God’s influence over what was taking place.

This Bible study, written by Will Prosser, originally ran for Epiphany in 2013.