

Sermon - "In Light of a New Perspective"
Sunday, January 26, 2014
Scripture - Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-23
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Our first scripture reading is Isaiah 9, verses 1-4. Toward the end of the exile for the Israelites, in the 8th century BCE, the ancient prophet uses the metaphor of light to proclaim the coming of God. The light, God's presence creates perspective that did not exist before. The people who were previously oppressed and treated "lightly" are now taken seriously and respected. It is a time of great joy! (Read Isaiah 9:1-4.)

Our second scripture reading found in the Gospel of Matthew 4:12-23, highlights the light metaphor in Isaiah to introduce the ministry of Christ. Matthew's tracing of Jesus' travels is not merely a travelogue but a theological statement. By beginning in Galilee, the land of the Gentiles, we are reminded that *the kingdom of God* welcomes all people. Jesus is also filling the void in John's ministry created by John's arrest. This journey is not without risk since Herod Antipas, who imprisoned John, still governed the area. Jesus began his ministry as he concluded it...with courage, conviction and strength to do the will of God. The calling of the disciples by Jesus emphasizes divine initiative. Just as Yahweh uprooted prophets from their ordinary existence, so Jesus calls persons to discipleship, then and today. Hear now God's word. (Read Matthew 4:12-23.)

The sermon: In Light of a New Perspective

The text: The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned. Matthew 4:16

Let us pray: Holy God, thank you for shining your light in the dark places of our lives, offering us insight and a new perspective. As we reflect on your word together, may the words of my mouth and meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you, our light and our salvation. Amen.

As we approached the city in a deep fog, the bright lights of the buildings provided an outline of the beautiful Chicago skyline, reassuring us we were traveling in the right direction. Standing out above the other buildings we could clearly make out the Sears Tower. When our son was a little boy, he called the Sears Tower the *Serious Tower* and indeed it is!

Whenever our family travels to Chicago, we worship at Fourth Presbyterian Church on Michigan Avenue, a beautiful gothic revival, architectural structure which was envisioned by the same man who designed and built Westminster. Ralph Adams Cram designed many buildings of West Point and served as the architect under Woodrow Wilson at Princeton University.

Worshipping at Fourth always lifts my spirit, particularly because of the role this congregation played on my journey into the ordained ministry. As a young woman seeking ordination in the Reformed Church of America, the path was not well lit and more challenging and wearisome than expected. Through unexpected detours and fortuitous circumstances, I found a church home at Fourth, *A Light in the City*, and a faith community that affirmed my call.

Needless to say, by the time I met with their ruling elders I was feeling quite intense. I remember having a mixed sense of anxiety and confidence as I responded earnestly to their questions. There was an atmosphere of congeniality for which I was grateful.

I was then asked to step into another room while they discussed and voted. I sat quietly for what seemed like a long time. Upon my return I was greeted by warm smiles around the large wooden table. The chairperson reported that they recommended me to the care of the Chicago Presbytery for the process of ordination. After a few affirmative comments, the chairperson concluded that they wanted to give me one piece of advice for my future ministry: "Blythe," she said fondly, "try not to take yourself too seriously."

What an utterly delightful piece of advice, and no one appreciated it more than I, especially at that point in my rather serious endeavor. I felt affirmed and supported as I drove home that night to my apartment in the Lincoln Park area.

And looking back, I can't help but recognize how much my being able to begin to relax was dependent upon that community of faith not only validating my call but recognizing me as a person...as a child of God. You see, I could only begin to take myself less seriously when the community I valued began to take me more seriously.

There is a little bit of a paradox here, and I think it's an important insight—in our personal relationships as well as in our faith. On the one hand, we as a church community need to continue to value one another and take each other seriously even as we take seriously what we share in the ministry of Jesus Christ. This is imperative for our well-being.

On the other hand, we need to remember to keep perspective and not take ourselves, our convictions and our endeavors too seriously. It's helpful and it's freeing to realize that although we are each important in the eyes of God, we may not be as important and indispensable as we sometimes think.

A dear friend and colleague, who took part in my Installation last November, gave me Craig Barnes' book The Pastor as Minor Poet and a sign which reads "It's Just Church!" Dr. Craig Barnes, the President of Princeton Theological Seminary writes in his book that this sign hangs over his door at seminary. *I'm not trying to make a cynical statement, he writes, but to offer an invitation to freedom. He contends, A pastor's ability to enjoy church is directly related to knowing its limitations. ...It may be the Body of Christ, but only sort of. The Reformers always maintained an important distinction between the visible body, which is weak, and the invisible Body of Christ, which transcends the limitations of the church we see. This frees the pastor not to take the church more seriously than God does."*

Or put another way by the Apostle Paul. *For now we know in part and we see in a mirror dimly...And we know what we know and we see what we see because of the light God has shed on our lives. The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.*

Throughout our faith tradition, light symbolizes God's presence. When Isaiah spoke these words a little over seven centuries before Christ was born, the prophet was giving hope to the people of the northern kingdom who lived in the grim darkness of Assyrian rule.

There is an interesting play on the words light and heavy in this passage in Isaiah. In former times the people were treated with contempt, which means to "make light." They were not

taken seriously. In the latter times, in the light of God's presence, they were glorified, which means to "make heavy." They were treated with significance. They rejoiced in being taken seriously!

Matthew chooses Isaiah's words to introduce the ministry of Jesus Christ precisely because he believed that Christ, in a unique way, embodied the presence of God in our world. And so with Christians who have come before us and who will come after us, we take the teachings and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ very seriously.

Matthew introduces Christ with the light metaphor, and then summarizes Christ's ministry with these words: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.* Unlike John the Baptist, Jesus says little about the sins of those to whom he preaches, and the text says nothing about confession, remorse, or forgiveness. *Repent*, in Greek, literally means *to change one's mind*. In Hebrew it means *to turn around, to return to God*. Jesus' call to repent is an invitation to change one's mind in light of a new perspective. This new perspective is as dramatic as the contrast between light and darkness and is in response to the kingdom having *come near*.

The lectionary readings in the next several Sundays are from the Sermon on the Mount. In these powerful words, we are confronted with a message that challenges, that pleads, that gently clarifies the inconsistencies in the perspective of well-meaning religious people like you and I. People, who begin to take themselves and their worldview too seriously.

Jesus takes our assumptions and turns them around: We see ourselves as blessed, and Jesus says, *Blessed are the poor in spirit, Blessed are those who mourn.*

Jesus challenges our perception of what is equitable and fair with a new possibility. *You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye...but I say to you, If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, defy their evil by turning your left to them also. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second.* Expose their contempt with the light of your generosity. You have heard it said, *Love your neighbors and hate your enemies...but I say love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*

Nowhere is Jesus' message more clear, more penetrating or more controversial than in the Sermon on the Mount, as he sheds light on a new perspective and invites those, with eyes to see, to enlarge their worldview, to accept the unacceptable, and to simply *change their minds*.

The Interpreter's Bible suggests this about Jesus: *Never setting foot outside of Palestine, Jesus was a supreme example of one who was so provincial that he became universal. He went so deep into human life that he touched the very core of it. It was because of him, therefore, who though he was a Jew yet belonged to all, that the disciples began to see that the fences they had built had no divine sanction, that God had no favorites, that there were no superior races, that there was no chosen people in the sense of a people who had priority above and beyond others.*

Over the years, Christians have made the same mistakes of all people...by taking ourselves and our worldview too seriously. Any time in our history when people have been treated with contempt and oppressed in the name of Jesus Christ, we have lost our way and God's perspective.

May God continue to shed light on our lives. Today, we gather as a church community, the visible body of Christ, on the crossroads of a new year. We gather to give thanks for our vocation and to affirm that we believe we are in the world for ministry.

May we serve with humility and kindness. May we treat those we serve with respect and love. And may we heed the advice of our elders, and do so without taking ourselves too seriously. To God be the glory. Amen.