

Epiphany Sunday
January 4, 2009

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
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Notes not for publication

As I've worked through the texts for Epiphany this week, the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem have stood out in my mind. The scriptures paint them today as cities bathed in light. We read in Matthew of Bethlehem, the town where the bright star "did both stop and stay, right over the place where Jesus lay," (The First Noel), drawing in wise ones bearing gifts and worship. They had ventured into the unfamiliar territory of Jesus' birth, surely outside their comfort zone as they navigated around the murderous paranoia of King Herod, always guided by the star. That light was and continues to be a light of attraction, and wise, knowing people humble themselves and respond before it on bended knee.

In Isaiah, we hear a poem of restoration for Jerusalem after the exile of its people. Your light has come, announces the prophet, and now you will be a light to the nations; even kings will be drawn in by the brightness of your dawn. Your sons and daughters will return to you, O Jerusalem, and wealth and prosperity will be yours; "[t]hen you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice." This is a light of fulfillment and peace, wholeness and reconciliation.

These cities and the whole land we call holy were in these texts symbols of a people, the people of Israel, and light has always been a symbol for the presence of God. Since Biblical times, that land has become holy for three different peoples, three different yet related faiths, all descended from the family of Abraham and Sarah. Only now, instead of visions of light and prosperity, some see visions of Armageddon there,

Christians and others who would provoke World War III to get Jesus to come back, people of faith who think they'll meet God by blowing somebody up and that somehow God's going to be glad to see them.

Jerusalem today is a city with a wall running down the middle of it. Jews in that city defend themselves against what they see as a hostile Arab presence all around them; fighting off centuries of oppression at different hands, many times Christian hands; swearing that they'll never be subjugated or victimized ever again. On the other side, the underside of the fight, are Palestinian Muslims and Christians, squeezed and cut off on every side by restrictions and prohibitions by the Israeli government, their economy shut down, homes bulldozed, olive trees uprooted; watching their children's future evaporate before it's begun; a few seeing nothing to be lost by strapping explosives to their bodies, taking unsuspecting others with them, trying to draw attention to their plight, succumbing to anger and the desire for revenge, the desire to make a difference, a dent in their reality. And of course as of last night, we now see these two sides embroiled in the tragedy of a bitter war, both by air and on the ground in Gaza.

The Holy City, Jerusalem; Bethlehem; the whole land of Judea—much more learned, experienced, poetic minds than mine have pondered this place and its peoples, its history and traditions, and tried to see its future. It is beyond my abilities to say definitively that Jerusalem is this, or the Holy Land needs that. But from my limited perspective, it seems a place where our need of God is most strikingly visible. And rather than wash our hands of the whole situation as too big and outside our control, I

believe there are ways we can connect that struggle to the struggle inside our own hearts. These can fit together and so show us the breadth of the light shining in the darkness.

There's a story that has nothing to do with the Holy Land at all. (Following quotations and paraphrase from *Messy Spirituality* by Mike Yaconelli, pp. 133-135.) It's about a man named Daryl, who used to help with the youth group in his church. He wasn't all that enthusiastic about that task, but he was even less interested in the youth-sponsored worship services held every month at the local nursing home. He hated nursing homes. One month, though, all the other youth leaders had the flu, so he agreed to go and help out, "as long as he did not have to be part of the program.

"During the service, Daryl felt awkward and out of place. He leaned against the back wall, between two residents in wheelchairs. Just as the service finished and Daryl was thinking about a quick exit, someone grabbed his hand. Startled, he looked down and saw a very old, frail, and obviously lonely man in a wheelchair. ... The man's mouth hung open, and his face held no expression. Daryl doubted whether he could hear or see anything.

"As everyone began to leave, Daryl realized he didn't want to leave the old man. Daryl had been left too many times in his own life. Caught somewhat off-guard by his feelings, Daryl leaned over and whispered, 'I'm...uh...sorry, I have to leave, but I'll be back, I promise.' Without warning, the man squeezed Daryl's hand and then let go." And the transformation had begun. It turns out the man's name was Oliver, and Daryl came back the next month to see him, and the month after that. As each month

passed, Daryl found himself looking forward to going to the nursing home. It was the same every time; "Daryl would stand in the back, Oliver would grab his hand, Daryl would say he had to leave, [and] Oliver would squeeze his hand..."

Finally the day came when Oliver was too ill to come to worship. Daryl went to look for him and was led by a nurse to Oliver's bedside. He had never seen death before, but he knew his friend was dying. He took Oliver's hand, but Oliver didn't respond. Daryl sat for an hour, with so much to say but saying nothing. Finally when he got ready to leave, he said, "I'm sorry, Oliver, I have to go. I love you," and as he let his hand go, he felt Oliver give it a squeeze. He turned to go, overcome with emotion, and he nearly ran into Oliver's granddaughter. She said she'd been waiting to meet him and told him that the night before, Oliver had awakened, "eyes bright and alert," and that he'd said, "Please say goodbye to Jesus for me." She'd replied, "Grandpa, I don't need to say goodbye to Jesus; you're going to be with him soon, and you can tell him hello." And Oliver said, "I know, but Jesus comes to see me every month, and he might not know I've gone."

This is where the light of Christ is revealed in the world—where we feel unsettled and outside our comfort zone, where we don't know what we're doing or where we're going but allow ourselves to be pulled into strange relationships, where our compassion, the weakness of our hearts, encounters need in others. There, in that place and that moment, Epiphany occurs. I do not know how to solve the Middle East crisis. But I do believe that Christ can and will be revealed there as surely as in any nursing home. I do believe that our Christian hearts can and must let themselves be

led by the Light of the World into uncomfortable territory. That may mean holding the hand of one who is strange to us. Or it may mean insisting that our leaders work to find a solution in the Middle East, insisting that they use the billions of tax dollars we give every year to Israel and the millions of dollars to Palestine to build peace and to protect all the vulnerable and defenseless of the land. We can allow ourselves to be drawn to the brightness of Christ's light, by being willing to serve suffering people with whom we feel little other connection, not just feeling pity, but stepping out on a new journey into a new land on their behalf.

I really do believe that the toughest issues of the world, of neighborhood and family, all boil down to this—when you've been brought low by the circumstances of your life, it makes you different, and it can make you available to Christ in a very important way for the work of healing and reconciliation and peace, the work of reflecting the light of Christ. It boils down to being humbled by what we have encountered in Christ, humbled and deepened by the grace and understanding, the comfort and hope he extends to us, open-handed, then allowing him to move our humbled hearts, to use our grateful spirits, to extend the same open hand to the world, on every level, personally and globally. When we see the light of Christ shining, when we arise and journey to meet it, we can trust that God will use our Epiphany to help bring in the kingdom in this world, in this life.