Feast of the Epiphany All Saints’ Church

Year B January 7, 2018 (transferred)

Isaiah 60:1-6 Ephesians 3:1-12

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14 Matthew 2:1-12

Guide us to thy perfect light!

I’ve always thought that our Isaiah passage this morning was talking about some in descript person- someone worthy of mention- worthy of the Lord’s glory, worthy of exaltation. I paid little attention to the words. I saw it briefly as a passage about award and honor and strength.

I rushed too quickly pass Isaiah to read Matthew’s story about the magi coming to Jesus, bearing gifts, which is one of my favorite descriptions of the inclusive nature of God’s glory.

At closer look though, the Isaiah passage is not about a person at all, but rather about the city Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, the deserted city, destroyed by the Babylonians’ plunder of fire and murder, with her inhabitants stripped away to be swallowed up forever in the diaspora. A city never to know herself again. A city left- forlorn, lost, abandoned to lingering smoke rising from mayhem and war. Desolate.

But no, cries Isaiah, “Arise, (Jerusalem) shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” Even though the blackness of war and the thick darkness of peoples’ evil ways are smoldering in your streets, you are no longer victim to hate. A casualty, you no longer are. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem-

“Lift up your eyes” (to see)… Nations again will come to you, following the brightness of your dawn: “your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms, walking to you on highways made straight.…. the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you.”

Gifts are coming to you, from the east, from Babylon. The faithful remnant under God’s will are returning home, to you, to their place of origin, to their wealth, to their faith, to their temple, to their families, carried on camels, bringing gold and frankincense, proclaiming the praise of the Lord. Your people are coming, now… to your embrace!

Desolate Jerusalem, arise!

Matthew is mirroring this amazing miracle of hope and renewal in his telling of the magi following a star, astrologer priests longing for dreams and possibilities, coming from the East, gathering strength and power, to defy despotic kings,

to identify the ***One***:

who will destroy evil;

who will devastate the blackness of war and the thick darkness of peoples’ ways;

who will deny a social order that negates beauty, hospitality and grace.

The Magi are coming, bowing down to a babe in the manger, as a sign of hope to the whole world, as a release for all victims of violence, injustice, pillage and war.

Bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh- gifts of riches, integrity, and compassion…. to pay homage to the Christ, to the glory of the Lord, to the babe who will become the Savior of the world…

The Redeemer, who is with us from the day of creation, from the day of our own birth, and who will be with us for always, sustaining us in all ways, residing forever in our hearts.

Jerusalem, The Christ child within, arise!

What I love about the coupling of Isaiah with Matthew is that we too are both Jerusalems, as part of our inner landscape. We are the desolate city Jerusalem and the Christ child, Jesus Jerusalem…. Both cities of life reside within us.

Often, it’s easier to know the desolate city that resides within…. To know when we are living within loss, pain, confusion, fears, hate, and terrors…. O yes, we know this forlorn city that dwells within us, all too well…It’s what makes us human. Those times in our lives when we feel left- forlorn, lost, abandoned to lingering smoke rising from mayhem and conflicts and illness and loss. Desolation.

Often, it takes work, and practice, and a community of faith to claim the other Jerusalem…the one where the Christ child resides within… That place where we know how to live with hope, healing, love, security, power to make a difference- that dwelling place where we can become saviors to each other, bearing gifts. O yes, God beckons us to know this city of Light that dwells within.

We are both: the desolate city Jerusalem, and the hopeful City Jerusalem of the indwelling of Christ. We are both. Both reside within us; the Lord judges neither.

There is a saying in the Middle East; I heard it first in Beirut.

“Ten shares of beauty gave the Lord to the world, nine to Jerusalem and one to the rest.

“Ten shares of tragedy gave the Lord to the world, nine to Jerusalem and one to the rest.”

Yes, we too are that city on the hill, Zion, that knows beauty and tragedy, as we move in and out of our different struggles and victories of life.

Notice that the Lord brings gifts to both Jerusalems! God is coming to you, like the father who runs to his prodigal son. Arise to the brightness of your dawn!

We know ourselves well when we are giving/receiving gifts out of our beauty- that’s not difficult.

What the Feast of the Epiphany recognizes is that we also give/receive gifts out of our suffering, out of our tragedies.

When we are living within our Desolate Jerusalem, when we know too intimately our fears, our anxieties, our illnesses, our losses, our grief, our worries, our struggles, our afflictions, our heartaches, our miseries…..

What are we to do?

It’s Epiphany. Give this desolation as a gift to the Lord, not with shame, or feelings of inadequacies, or humiliation or disgrace. The Lord is coming to you and recognizes always the brightness of your dawn.

So tie up your fear with a bow, package your anger with Christmas wrappings, put your loss in a Christmas bag and hand all of it to the Lord…. as a gift. These feelings are precious to the Lord. And they will be received as gifts. They are real and in their truthfulness, they become prayers.

Why? Because you belong to the Lord, all parts of you, and God wants it all. God redeems all, resurrects all, brings life out of death.

Desolate Jerusalem, arise!

Jerusalem, The Christ child within, arise!

And know that you are the gift, in your beauty and in your tragedy. You are the gift.

AMEN