

January 22, 2023  
Epiphany 3-A  
All Saints', Littleton, NH  
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Isaiah 9: 1-4  
Psalm 27: 1, 5-13  
Cor. 1: 10-18  
Matthew 4:12-23

Today in the gospel Jesus returned home to the region of Galilee to begin his ministry. What was it like for Jesus to return to the area where he was raised, a land under Roman rule, and proclaim the gospel of the reign of God? At the time of Jesus, certainly the region of historic Israel was an occupied territory by Rome and under puppet kings, but it once was also a conquered land by the Assyrians, which the Isaiah passage speaks of. The Isaiah passage this morning references the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali. Who knows what those lands were and who were they named after? .....Zebulun and Naphtali, as shown in the map in your handout in the bulletin, were tribal lands of 2 of the 12 tribes of Israel. OK, bonus points for anyone who can tell us where the 12 tribes came from? Yes, the 12 sons of Jacob, who after wrestling with the angel at Bethel was renamed 'Israel'. His twelve sons became the 12 tribes of the nation of Israel, and they are: Zebulun, Naphtali, Levi, Asher, Gad, Benjamin, Simeon, Judah, Dan, Reuben, Issachar, and Joseph's sons – the 2 tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. So, when you hear in the Old Testament God speaking through a prophet or the psalmist to Jacob or Israel, you know the writer is referencing the nation.

After Israel had split into 2 kingdoms, the northern and southern kingdoms, it was the 10 tribes of the northern kingdom which were at the door of the Assyrians, and it was Tiglath-Pileser, King of Assyria, who conquered northern Israel in or around about 733 B.C.—which of course included Zebulun and Naphtali. For the faithful, that part of the nation fell into darkness, as Isaiah put it, under Assyrian rule. In Isaiah, the prophet is rejoicing that these lands of once again come back to Israel and indeed the light is shining to all nations.

Matthew picked up this theme with Jesus' return to the Galilee region and, as Matthew is want to do, picks up this prophecy of Isaiah being fulfilled in Jesus' return to that region of Zebulun and Naphtali—another great light has come! In Isaiah the people are returning to their land and the darkness is overcome; in Matthew's gospel Jesus returns to the same area and the new light has dawned in his coming, and he preaches about a new kingdom, a new reign of God. Many times in the gospel the words here are translated as 'Kingdom of God', but many scholars think it is better translated as a new 'reign of God'.....and this not to appease a feminist critique, but to help people understand, as Jesus tried, that though people thought of kingdoms as something of this world, his was clearly not of this world—he was not talking about a kingdom, a geographical space, as people generally understood it, but rather the reign of God in hearts.

For us who live in the light of Christ, we know this 'reign of God' through Christ. And we know it to be 'a light to the nations' and we know it is our responsibility to carry this light into all the world. It is not just for our little tribe of Episcopalians, Zebulun or Naphtali!

Paul, in the portion of his first letter to the Corinthians we read this morning, gets right at this point. Remember how last week, in the beginning of the letter just previous to this passage, he was buttering them up and he said: ... 'I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift....' Well, now he lets them have it! He has heard of descension among them with people declaring that they were followers of Paul, or Cephas (Peter), or Apollos—the gifted evangelist. But he says, 'No!' He reminds them they are nothing without Christ, but they are everything and united through in Christ.

It must be noted that this is the week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which was partly chosen because of this lesson appearing in the lectionary for this Sunday. This is, of course, our wonderful slap in the face from Paul about our divisions—2000 years later! Every honest Christian knows that our divisions are a scandal—as it was then, so it is now. To be sure, there is much to be learned and appreciated by the distinction between unity and uniformity. And we must find some truth in the fact that though we may not be uniform, we are called to a unity that is beyond all

denominationalism. In the Eucharistic Prayer used this morning there is this wonderful line: “Unite us to your Son in his sacrifice, that we may be acceptable through him, being sanctified by the Holy Spirit.” It is through Christ that our essential unity is revealed and we are sanctified by the Holy Spirit—not the Holy Prayer Book! As our wonderful Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, is fond of saying: “We are the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement”!

There is a wonderful story by an old rabbi who is trying to get his students to understand this point.....” *who asked his students how they could tell when night had ended and day was on its way back. One student said, “Could it be when you see an animal in the distance and can tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?” “No,” answered the rabbi. Another student said, “Could it be when you look at a tree in the distance and can tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?” “No,” answered the rabbi. “Well, then,” the students demanded, “when is it?” The rabbi answered, “When you look on the face of any man or woman and see that she or he is your brother or sister. Because if you cannot do that, then no matter what time it is, it is still night.” (from Fr. John Morris’ blog, Jan 22, 2023)*

Now, for a little practical advice about avoiding factionalism.....here it is, “love everyone!” Find the good in everyone and have the courage to tell them so. When we build one another up in Christ we begin to explore our essential unity. This is carrying on from what I said last week and the quote from Paul above. This is not to say that we don’t need to call out wrong when we see it, and stand up for the weak and for ourselves when the image of God in us is being attacked, but start first with reaching out and finding good. The flip side of this same coin is nicely exhibited in the General Confession we say on Sundays--we all say it because we All have sinned and are in need of God’s love and forgiveness. So spread the great light of Christ and proclaim this new reign of God; and just like Jesus promised Peter in the gospel this morning, God will make You fishers of people!

Practically speaking this may begin with the practice of the praise of God for various gifts and blessings; and the praise of God for the gifts God has bestowed on other people. Practice recognizing them and then have the courage to tell them so!

[Few minutes of silence, then share.....Can we take a few moments and just praise God for the people in our midst? Tell me, what do you see....and not about me please. Think of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. In whose life have you seen these fruits? Let’s build up the community of faith!]