

Weekly Reading – Monday, December 31, 2007

This coming Sunday is both the first Sunday of 2008 and the last Sunday of the Twelve Days of Christmas and therefore, Epiphany. The lessons for Epiphany are the same each year, which presents a special challenge to the preacher. Nevertheless, there are many possibilities woven into the three lessons.

Isaiah 60: 1 – 6

This text does contain one of my own favorite lines of Scripture, "A multitude of camels shall cover you." That is, by the way, a blessing and not a curse, though from what little I know of camels I am not sure about that. The text is chosen, however, for 6b, "They shall bring gold and frankincense," which the magi did. The larger context is an epiphany, arevealing of God's glory/light to God's people, Israel, and a consequent gathering both of the scattered and dispersed Israel and a gathering of the nations (peoples) of the earth. There are two themes that strike me: reversal and universality. This revealing of the Lord's glory and Israel's mirrored radiance, is an astonishing reversal of Israel's fortunes as a people in exile. The lowly are lifted up, and the mighty cast down. This does, in fact, happen in history, though usually not as quickly as we would like. The other theme, central to Epiphany, is the universality of God's revelation. It is not for Israel alone, but through Israel to all people. Or as Genesis put it, "I will bless you that you may be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth."

Ephesians 3: 1 – 12

Now Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, joins his voice to the praise of God's expansiveness. "The Gentiles," verse 6, "have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." There is a suggestive, intriguing phrase in verse 10: "so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places." Why the words, "in its rich variety? I do not know, but I do find them suggestive for our vexed time when it seems variety is to many a curse or problem rather than a blessing and gift. Whether conservative or liberal, many seem to want everyone to think, see and act as they do, rather than perceiving God's gift in rich variety. Perhaps Paul is suggesting that the shape and form of church will be different among Gentiles than it is among Jews? In both this text and the previous one, there is a sense of God's newness breaking into the world. Give us, O God, eyes for your epiphanies, for your newness in our frightened and weary world!

Matthew 2: 1 - 12

Finally, though by now the tree is at the curb awaiting collection and the decorations have been packed away for another year, the magi make it to the manger. (Since we were in Africa at Christmas, I would say the liturgy on Christmas Day worked fine, not suffering a bit for being in the southern hemisphere and at 80 degree temperatures. What didn't work so well were Christmas lights, trees and carols in the shopping areas. These seemed out of place.) Back to the lesson, which has more tension in it than the other two. The tension is between powers of this world, represented by Herod, and God's strange wisdom, represented by the

wise men and the babe. The wise men embody a wisdom that is not, seemingly, available to Herod or even to the chief priests and scribes. For our own world and time, this suggests a spiritual wisdom that is given over against a technical knowledge that is grasped or grasped at. Like Herod and Jerusalem, much of our own world has gone deaf and blind to God's wisdom, preferring our own calculations and machinations. Epiphanies of God, and the particular epiphany that is Jesus, beckon us to travel always by "another road" (verse 12) different than the established roads and ways.