

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Third Sunday after Epiphany – Year A

RCL Readings – Isaiah 9:1-4; Psalm 27:1,4-9; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

ACNA Readings – Amos 3:1-11; Psalm 139:1-18; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-23

Introduction. In Hebraic exegesis, beginnings and endings often occur in the same format, in the same place, and many times use the same people. For example, Israel was called to be a light to the nations and bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth (Isa 49:6). The first king of Israel tasked to lead the people in being a light to the Gentiles was Saul of the tribe of Benjamin, but he failed. Post resurrection, which apostle was called to bring the light of the gospel to the Gentiles? A second Saul of the tribe of Benjamin, the Apostle Paul, and he succeeded.

Common Theme. One aspect of the word *epiphany* is in the context of a sudden revelation or understanding. "I've had an epiphany" is an expression that means we now see something we hadn't seen before, as though the light had come on in our minds, so to speak. Many of the readings this week revolve around the light of God as he works to reveal himself and so illumine the darkness that blinds his people.

Isaiah 9:1-4. In chapter 8, Isaiah prophesied some dark tidings ahead for the nation of Israel regarding the imminent Assyrian invasion. This invasion would start in the north and largely affect the ten tribes in the northern kingdom of Israel. They would bear the brunt of the coming conflict, but Isaiah now prophesies they will also be the first to see God's redemption. The prophet contrasts themes of darkness against light without any specifics as to what the darkness or the light actually is. The promise is that the northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali would be the first to witness the great light. Why is the north so important? Why not the southern tribe of Judah who will produce the coming Messiah, the Light of the World?

There is a much-overlooked passage in the first chapter of Leviticus that raised some interesting questions for the Jewish sages. Leviticus 1:11 instructs the Israelites to slaughter their sacrifices at the north side of the altar. The text of Leviticus offers no reason for this command, however the Jewish sages took this to imply that the redemptive process begins in the north. Psalm 75:6 reflects this thinking when the psalmist declares that exaltation does not come from the east, west, or the desert (which is in the south), implying that the north is the direction that's important here. Naphtali, Zebulun along with Issachar are the tribes in the Galilee region, and the Gospel writers connect this prophecy to the ministry of Jesus geographically situated in the Galilee of the Gentiles.

Psalm 27:1, 4-9. It is unclear in which period of David's life he writes this psalm. David may have been going through some dark times, but his focus here is not on his problems but rather on the light. David compares the light of God with his salvation. The opening verse is one of bold confidence and hope that God is light and in that light is salvation. Because God is light and salvation then there is no reason to fear the darkness. With his hope in God and a fearless heart, David seeks the company of the Lord. His

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desire is to be with the Lord. In David's context, this was the sacred sanctuary where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. It was there between the cherubim that God had said through Moses that he would meet the people, and David's desire was to seek his presence. David is telling us that there is a special blessing for those who earnestly desire the presence of the Lord. The promise is not that times of trouble won't come or that darkness will not exist in our lives. The promise is that the darkness can be chased away by the light and that salvation can come to us in times of trial.

1 Corinthians 1:10-18. It appears that the Corinthian believers had become attached to various teachers which had created factions and divisions in the community. In all honesty, after two thousand years, it appears we are still suffering the same phenomena within the worldwide Christian church. The Greek word for division is *schismata* (σχίσματα) from which we derive the modern word schism and is quite a strong word. Paul is not talking about simple disagreements between friends where the friendship is maintained, but things that are tearing the community apart in very unhelpful ways. Paul appeals to the Corinthians for unity. Unity is not that everyone has to think exactly the same theologically or pray the same prayers or dress in the same fashion. This is not to say that, "everything goes" as there are some non-negotiables. For example, Jesus is Lord and there is no other. Or that the resurrection is indeed physically true and not something esoteric and spiritual.

Unity can and should celebrate our diversity without compromising the essential truths of Scripture. Unity in the biblical sense is behavioural. Colossians 3:12-14 instructs us to clothe ourselves with compassion for each other, with kindness, humility and gentleness, and patience. We are to bear with each other despite offence and to forgive each other. We are to wrap all this in love, and this will be our unity. Unity is functional and practical. The message that unites all believers across the world and through the ages is the message of the cross!

Paul notes that the message of the cross is counter-cultural and completely misunderstood by secular society. Paul calls the message of the cross – the death and resurrection of Jesus – the power of salvation. That power is not military, although God is all-powerful. It is not destructive in nature but creative in wonder. It is not nurtured in darkness or fear but proclaimed in light and hope. The power of salvation is something that should unite believers together in all of our diversity.

Matthew 4:12-23. Nazareth today is known as the Arab capital of Israel, but in Jesus' day, it was located in the tribal territory of Zebulun. Jesus relocates himself to the Galilee region of Naphtali when he moves to Capernaum. Capernaum means "village of Nahum" or "village of comfort", but there is no indication that this is a reference to the prophet of the same name. Interestingly, Menachem (from the same root as Nahum) is one of the traditional names of the Messiah for he will comfort his people (Isa 40:1).

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Matthew connects the beginning of Jesus' itinerant Galilee ministry with the prophetic portion of Isaiah. The beginning of redemption is in the preaching of the kingdom of heaven, the miracles, the healings, the casting out of demons and the calling of the disciples all begin in the north. The teacher-student model of rabbi-disciple that we see in the Gospels was not a Jewish invention. It was actually an earlier Greek idea. The Jewish people took the Greek tutor-student model and made it culturally significant to the Jewish context. The rabbinical movement was still in its infant stages at the time of Jesus. In the Gospel narratives, Jesus is not recorded as meeting any other rabbis. Neither does Paul meet any rabbis in the Book of Acts and nor is he called a rabbi.¹

Discipleship at the time of Jesus involved a commitment to live with, follow, and study the lifestyle and teachings of the rabbi. You didn't get paid to be a student and follow the teacher, but you had to pay the rabbi and cover his expenses. The disciple not only followed the teacher but was to be the living embodiment of the teacher's wisdom. As 1 John 2:6 says, "Whoever claims to live in him must live as he did".

Jesus called his disciples to be "fishers of men" and to "fish for people". What was so compelling about being a fisherman for people in the ears of the early disciples? Perhaps it can be traced to the prophetic proclamation in Jeremiah 16:14-16 in which Jeremiah spoke in messianic overtones of a time when God would send out people to fish for people. Many of the disciples of Jesus had been disciples of John. John the Baptist – before his arrest – had made many messianic declarations about Jesus. The disciples heard John and saw in Jesus a messianic hope and so eagerly left their professions and livelihoods to follow and imitate Jesus.

ACNA Readings

Amos 3:1-11. At the time of the preaching of Amos, the greatest act of redemption in the history of the Jewish people was the exodus from Egypt. Israel had been brought out of Egypt through a mighty hand and an outstretched arm by the Lord. In the opening words of judgment against Israel, the prophet Amos reminds the people of this great act. This great act of mercy, grace, and sovereign power from God to Israel should have borne practical and spiritual fruit in the obligations and responsibility that Israel had in response to the goodness of God. However, Amos declares in verse 10, "They do not know how to do right". Israel had forgotten what God had done for them, and they had neglected his instructions and obligations. People are bound to repeat history only if they forget the lessons of history. This is true of the Christian walk too. If we forget that Christ died for us while we were sinners, if we forget the love of God in sending Jesus and the salvation offered in the resurrection, then we forget that the Light has indeed come into the world. The darkness can seem overwhelming, and the enemy can come to take our

¹ The first person in Jewish literature who is called a rabbi is Gamaliel in Pirke Avot. Hillel and Shammai are never called rabbis.

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hope away. One of the blessings of the church is to proclaim, during the service following confession, the assurance of salvation and forgiveness. Too many people come to church believing in Jesus but doubting their salvation. We need to be reminded every day of the light that has come into the world and return us once again to the joy of our salvation.

Psalm 139:1-18. God is not aloof from the world he created. Nor is he removed from the struggles of his people. This psalm reminds us how close God is to our personal trials and situations. The Lord has a personal knowledge of everyone one of us, which is incredible to think about. As David says, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me”. God knows us better than we know ourselves. We sometimes reject what the Bible says about ourselves and the human condition. David reminds us that we cannot escape from the ever-present God, nor hide from his sight. Instead the knowledge that the Lord is indeed ever-present means that his light will always be there to chase away the darkness.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.