

A Homily for Epiphany

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Isaiah 60:1–3

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will be seen upon you.
And nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your rising.*

The problem preaching Epiphany is that, even though the light has come, most days we have a hard time seeing it. We still seem to be living in so much darkness. Thick darkness covers our world, a thick fog or mist that obscures the light so much we wonder if that light has been snuffed out or whether perhaps it's never really been there at all.

There is the congregation—maybe it's one of yours— that had prepared its Christmas pageant. All the parts had been assigned and well rehearsed. Shepherds, lowly beasts, wise men from the East—the whole cast chosen, rehearsed, ready for the solemn night. And cast in the roles of Mary, Joseph, and the Baby Jesus, there were the young couple, who had only recently joined the congregation, and their new born baby boy. Or so it was planned and practiced until the night before the event was to occur. While the couple were out and a babysitter attended to their little child—the baby who on the next evening was to play the holy Christ child—while the couple were out, their little son was suddenly struck down by that most strange and sudden syndrome that had carried away so many other infants in their cribs, and the baby was dead. The next evening the pageant went on, without a Mary or a Joseph; and the manger was empty of a Christ child. And the young couple who were to have seen a great light sat and still sit in a thick darkness, pondering these awful and mysterious things in their broken hearts.

How during this Epiphany season may any one of us dare to say to this bereft young couple, "Arise, shine, for your light has come"? The words make a mockery of their struggle merely to survive in the darkling world that has closed in about them.

How about you and me or those about us whom we know best? However much we may beam brightly in the presence of others, whatever lofty words of faith and trust we speak to one another, we know in ourselves and in those few who entrust to us the truth

about themselves the thick darkness that enshrouds our lives. I have found that even men and women of faith, when they are talking not about the faith but about themselves, tell stories of their stumbling attempts to find a footing in a dark world that threatens them with meaninglessness and despair.

I guess that's why Frederick Buechner says that the Gospel is bad news before it can be good news. Apparently you can't have the glory of Christmas and Epiphany without the Lenten cross as well. The light shines in the darkness.

So maybe it wasn't so incongruous, after all, for KQED to schedule Laurence Olivier's King Lear during the Christmas holiday. I watched it and saw aged King Lear, cast out from his kingdom by plotting and deceitful children, stand alone in the night pounded by the fury of a murderous storm and comment on what he had only now come to recognize as the human condition:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these?

Yet it is exactly at this moment of degradation, when the old king has become a poor naked wretch himself, that he grows into his full humanity, that he is delivered from the vanity and pomposity of his former life. He continues:

O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp;
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And show the heavens more just.

Lear was to suffer more in this play, and yet he grew to a greater stature in our eyes. As Buechner says, "Mad old Lear loses his crown and his kingdom but at the last becomes for the first time truly a king."

"Kings shall come to the brightness of your rising," Isaiah says. But they don't generally come by following a star from the east. They come by seeing within the darkness around them the light of divine truth, by exposing themselves "to feel what wretches feel," by acknowledging that they themselves are "poor naked wretches pelted by life's pitiless storms," by discovering that the light shines in the darkness because their God has entered that darkness with them, God becoming a poor naked wretch in a Bethlehem manger, in Herod's court, on Calvary's tree, defending us all "from seasons such as these," thereby showing "the heavens more just."

I think that's the true epiphany, shining exactly in our darkness, that we can preach during this season. And, to make at least a passing comment on the theme that brought us

together today, I guess you and I want to find and nurture together seminarians who experience such an epiphany and can help us to see it too, who can help us to rise in our darkness and shine, for even here, especially here, the glory of the Lord has risen upon us.