

**EPIPHANY: A NEW DAY DAWNS** (Ephesians 3:1-12, and Isaiah 60:1-6)  
Sermon at Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship, Berne Jan. 10, 2010  
Jacob Elias

Recently we saw the movie "Invictus" featuring the story of Nelson Mandela.  
As a young man he worked actively for change in his native South Africa.  
The South African government was following a policy called apartheid  
in which minority whites dominated the black majority population.  
Mandela, a black man, worked for equality, and got himself thrown into jail.  
For 27 years he was in prison, but his hopes for his nation did not die.  
On February 11, 1990 he was finally allowed to come home.  
And people noticed: His release was broadcast throughout the world.

The opening scene of the movie shows Africans playing soccer  
and across the street, behind a high wire fence, white men playing rugby,  
while the motorcade delivering Mandela back to his home passes by.  
The soccer players, all black, waved and cheered.  
The rugby players, all white, sniffed their disdain, and jeered.  
4 years later, Mandela's party won the first multi-racial democratic election,  
and at age 75 Mandela became his nation's first black prime minister.  
The movie "Invictus" focuses on some of his efforts to achieve reconciliation  
in a nation divided, with blacks and whites co-existing but hostile.

This evening we heard from a letter written by an earlier agitator for change,  
the apostle Paul.  
His letter to the Ephesians reminds me of the Mandela story.  
Paul calls himself "a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles."  
Now that self-introduction is a mouthful: It speaks volumes!  
Paul was a Jew who was held captive in a prison  
somewhere in the vast empire dominated by Caesar in Rome.  
As a Jewish apostle languishing in a prison staffed by Gentiles  
Paul uses his time to pray and think and write letters.  
He reflects on his personal calling as apostle to the Gentiles,  
and he thinks deeply about relationships between Jews and Gentiles.  
As a prisoner held captive by Roman guards, Paul knew full well  
that many Gentiles viewed Jews as scum,  
as people whose longing for freedom needed to be squelched.  
As a Jew trained as a Pharisee Paul also realized  
that many of his fellow Jews viewed Gentiles as scum, as outsiders,  
as people not worthy of being included among God's people.  
A high fence divided Jews and Gentiles from each other.  
As a result of his personal face-to-face encounter with Jesus,  
Paul saw the relationship between Jews and Gentiles very differently.

Paul senses clearly that now that the Messiah is here a new day has dawned. Earlier in this letter Paul speaks directly to his *Gentile* readers, saying:  
... you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints  
and also members of the household of God, (2:19)

Paul basically repeats this claim in 3:5,6 (note that he calls it "this mystery"):

<sup>5</sup> In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind,  
as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:  
<sup>6</sup> that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body,  
and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Paul had experienced an overwhelming "aha" moment when he met Christ.  
This was his personal "epiphany"... a holy "aha!" a revelation from God.  
So profound was his resulting recognition that a new day had dawned  
that he was ready to suffer and even go to jail for it.

Our calendars tell us, and the snow cover provides verification, that this is January,  
but on our church calendar we have now entered the season of Epiphany.  
Last Wednesday, January 6, was the day of Epiphany,  
sometimes called Three Kings Day or the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas.  
When something that was hidden is revealed so that we understand,  
we say we have an Epiphany.  
Epiphany means revealing; something that was hidden is brought to light!  
On Epiphany we remember that God revealed his mystery to the world.

Now... when something revolutionary happens, the question is, Will people notice?  
Or will people go on with life as though nothing has changed?  
Paul had an epiphany, his life was transformed, and his ministry led to  
change.  
As a result of his testimony many *Gentiles* and some *Jews* became convinced  
that a new day had dawned: God was doing something radically new.  
Walls of suspicion and hostility were being torn down.  
*Gentiles* and *Jews* joined this movement, the church of Jesus Christ,  
even though for many this choice led to suffering.

Epiphany, as I've already noted, is sometimes called Three Kings Day.  
Twelve days after Christmas we are reminded about the journey of the magi,  
who came to sense that something strikingly new was breaking in.  
They chose to pursue it and share deeply in this newness.  
When a teenage mom gives birth in a barn in obscure Bethlehem,  
what is the chance that this event will grab headlines?  
King Herod and Caesar's deputies were accustomed to media attention,  
but would anyone take note of a displaced couple with a newborn?  
Rumors about angels appearing to shepherds were easily dismissed as  
rumors.  
But when a caravan of wise men from the east appeared in Jerusalem,

king Herod shook in his boots.  
This was bad news, and Herod was deeply perplexed.  
Important people from far away had heard  
that a future Jewish king had recently been born!  
Herod began to chart a violent strategy to eliminate this threat.  
Meanwhile, these foreigners from the east journeyed further,  
guided by the star that had been their companion all the way.  
In Bethlehem they found the child, worshiped, and presented their gifts,  
and then, overwhelmed with joy, they began their journey home.

Even foreigners took note of what had happened in Bethlehem,  
the little Jewish town, where Jesus was born.  
Here was a remarkable "epiphany"!  
The Creator of the stars and the sun, the earth and all its inhabitants,  
caught the attention of a caravan of astrologers.  
They made the trek, possibly all the way from present day Iraq.  
Reaching their destination, these Gentile foreigners bow before a child  
who is reputed to be the messiah,  
the ruler who would shepherd God's people Israel. (Matt. 2:6)

Many of our hymns of this season ponder the mystery of God's coming in Jesus.  
Some of our hymns also raise the question of whether people will take note.  
I am thinking about a relatively new song, "Who would think (God's surprise)"  
by John Bell and Graham Maule, in Heaven Shall Not Wait Music:

1. Who would think that what was needed to transform and save the earth  
Might not be a plan or army proud in purpose, proved in worth?  
Who would think, despite derision, that a child would lead the way?  
**God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas Day!**
2. Shepherds watch and wise men wonder, monarchs scorn and angels sing;  
Such a place as none would reckon hosts a holy helpless thing,  
Stable beasts and bypassed strangers watch a baby laid in hay.  
**God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas Day!**
3. Centuries of skill and science span the past from which we move,  
Yet experience questions whether with such progress we improve.  
While the human lot we ponder, lest our hopes and humor fray,  
**God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas Day!**

The stunning story of Jesus' birth has been domesticated for many of us,  
sanitized, rendered innocuous, and we hardly catch its revolutionary import.  
Has the "aha" become "ho-hum" for us?  
Have the promise and the reality of a new day faded for us?  
Have we become jaded in our passion for God's reign on earth as in heaven?

So much of the Bible testifies about a God who works newness,  
the God who surprises earth with heaven.

Do we like the magi get the message, explore it for ourselves,  
and worship and serve this surprise-working God?  
Do we like Paul commit ourselves to joyful testimony about Jesus Christ  
through whom God still works all things new?  
Do we trust God to work among us and through us  
to restore relationships among people hostile toward each other?  
Can we identify with Nelson Mandela who put his life on the line  
in efforts toward truth-telling and reconciliation in South Africa?

Epiphany, the New Year, is a time for taking stock,  
a season for envisioning afresh the newness that God longs to bring.  
Already in the sixth century before Christ  
Isaiah the prophet glimpsed a new day dawning for Israel in exile.  
In Isaiah 60 the prophet encourages a people held as prisoners in Babylon:  
<sup>1</sup> Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.  
The prophet promises an "epiphany" ... a surprising manifestation from God  
for a people often overwhelmed in their hopelessness:  
<sup>2</sup> For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.  
So dramatic will be the surprising activity of God, the prophet promises,  
that it will grab headlines, catching the attention of people far away.  
Isaiah's forecast of the dawning of a new day is an extraordinary revelation.  
It helps us to realize anew how "God surprises earth with heaven ...":  
<sup>3</sup> Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.  
<sup>4</sup> Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far away,  
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.  
<sup>5</sup> Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice,  
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.  
<sup>6</sup> A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Does Isaiah's glimpse of the dawning of a new day remind you of the magi's visit?  
Surely, it should!  
However, we can also see in this remarkable portrait of the future  
what the apostle Paul came to see.  
His life direction, like that of the magi, had been turned around  
by an epiphany, a dramatic revelation from God.  
But Paul realized deep down that he had experienced his "aha" of God's grace  
not for his own benefit alone but as a calling to benefit others:  
<sup>8</sup> Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me  
to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ,  
<sup>9</sup> and to make everyone see  
what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages

in God who created all things;  
<sup>10</sup> so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety  
might now be made known to the rulers and authorities  
in the heavenly places.

Here was an expansive vision, a remarkable sense of the dawn of God's new day!  
Every time I hear discouraging news of another terror plot,  
followed by predictable calls to respond with even more terror,  
I wonder whether the dawning of a new day in Jesus Christ  
can still inspire us all to love our enemies,  
to bless those who persecute us,  
and to pray for those who want to do us harm.  
That is how God longs for us to participate in surprising earth with heaven.  
People who know God's revelation in Jesus will live faithfully in the light,  
confident even when the darkness still threatens.  
Such courage comes from the God who surprises us with grace and joy,  
the God who through Christ gives us strength for the struggle.

Some of us, and those we love, are sometimes tempted to give up.  
When the darkness gathers around us, it may seem like nothing has changed.  
Marriages continue to fail, (as was also the case for Mandela).  
People get hooked on drugs and become captive to alcohol.  
God's gift of sexuality is too often abused and perverted.  
Airport security is tightened because of threats of terror.  
Jobs continue to be scarce.

Yet, if we stay tuned to the Gospel and stay aligned with others who so,  
if we continue to remember the future already guaranteed by God,  
if we identify with Isaiah's word of hope to exiles,  
if we echo the overwhelming joy of the magi at the manger,  
if we rehearse the persistent testimony of Paul the apostle,  
if we recall the witness of those who struggle for reconciliation,  
we too can live within our lived personal experience of Epiphany.  
And the voice and the witness of the saints encourage us on,  
including those who have completed their journey on earth:  
Peter J. Dyck, an MCC pioneer, whose funeral was yesterday,  
Elsie Troyer, a sister at Parkview, whose funeral will be on Saturday.  
God continues to surprise earth with heaven!  
A new day has dawned.  
Let us live with joy into the newness that God has brought!