

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

January, 2008

Pastor Dave Peters and I spent the Feast of Epiphany with the congregation at Our Saviour's, Rocky Boy. Our Saviour's is the Montana Synod's only congregation that is primarily American Indian, and it was a privilege to be there preaching and leading worship on this important day in the church year. Although the Rocky Boy Reservation is the newest of Montana's 7 reservations, we have had a Lutheran presence there since almost the beginning. Our Saviour's has a long tradition in the Rocky Boy community.

The Season of Epiphany has traditionally been a time when the church has emphasized outreach, global mission, new ways of looking at things. Worshiping in a culture other than the one to which you are accustomed is a marvelous way to see the Gospel in a new light, to widen your horizons and see new possibilities for mission. Being at Rocky Boy gave me a new appreciation for Epiphany, and I wanted to share my sermon with you.

I would love to hear your stories, too.

Bishop Jessica Crist

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Epiphany 2008 Matthew 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-6 Our Saviour's, Rocky Boy

Grace to you and peace, from God our Creator, and from our Savior, Christ the Newborn King!

It is Epiphany today, the festival of the church when we celebrate the light, and when we commemorate the coming of the Wise Men to honor the baby Jesus. Christ is central in all this, as he is in our lives. And I want to talk with you this morning about two different aspects of this story.

The first is the before. In the first lesson this morning, from Isaiah, we have the image of a people defeated, a people discouraged. This is the people who have walked in darkness. Their country has been overcome, invaded, depopulated. Most of the people have been resettled. Their way of life has been altered, even their religion has been messed with. They are a people who have come to the end of the road.

Maybe you can understand that a little bit. Maybe you can understand what it is to be a people, a race, invaded, taken over, removed, resettled...all at the convenience of the invaders, all at the whim of the takers of the land. I think that there is a way in which American Indian people, along with other indigenous peoples, can relate to these biblical stories of invasion, forced exile, defeat and despair.

Tim Giago of the Oglala Lakota nation has occasional editorials in the Great Falls Tribune, and last Saturday he commemorated the anniversary of the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee, when

300 Lakota people, mostly women and children, were shot to death by the US Cavalry, who then received Medals of Honor.

Comparing the slaughter to the work of Adolf Hitler in Nazi Germany and Pol Pot in Cambodia, he writes: "...the attempted extermination of the Jews was taken much more seriously than the extermination of the Lakota people. After all, according to the white man, we were just Indians and subhumans at that, and we didn't have the power of the press or of the free world to support our claim to life. In order for American to expand, the people of the Great Sioux Nation had to be expendable."

Almost all tribes have similar stories, similar experiences of violent oppression at worst, marginalization at best, and that is exactly what the people of Israel are experiencing when we enter the text in Isaiah. They are at their lowest point. They have no power, no dignity, no identity. They are a wholly owned subsidiary of the invading empire.

And the prophet says: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." "Arise, shine." These are commands to one who is prostrate, beaten down, grieving, hopeless, on the ground.

The people are in deep darkness, darkness that covers the earth, thick darkness. But God calls them out of the darkness, into the light. Sometimes it is hard to leave the darkness. If you've ever walked into a dark room and had someone turn the lights on suddenly, you startle, you blink, you stumble a bit. Even though eventually you see better, at first you are nearly blinded by the light. It is so intense, it is such a contrast.

Have you ever been to the airport in Great Falls? There used to be a map of the world that showed the different time zones. And it also showed where it is night and where it is day. There's a kind of shadow thing that moves inexorable across the map, with a line between daylight and darkness. In Isaiah it is as if God is summoning the people out of the dark side of the map into the light.

And the image is developed further. In the light, the people are transformed by the light, and "nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." It is like the story of the Transfiguration, when Jesus goes up on the mountain and he is surrounded by a cloud and he is radiant, transfigured.

The last time I was at Rocky Boy, it was May, Mother's Day. I was driving here from the Fort Peck Reservation, and there was rain off and on all along the hi-line. When I made the turn into Rocky Boy, as I headed up into the hills, there was an amazing cloud that rolled in and sat right on the mountain. It was so impressive that I stopped and took a picture of it, and I have that photo as my background on my computer. It reminds me of you, and it reminds me of the Transfiguration of Jesus. And it reminds me of this text from Isaiah, where the people are summoned out of the darkness into a new promise, a new reality, described as light.

From the huddled figure facing the ground, to the glory of the Lord rising upon the people, nations coming, kings arriving—Look up! They gather! They are coming home, coming back to the light! The dispersed people, the relocated people, the assimilated people, the people who had to go elsewhere to find jobs, the children who left to get an education, serve their country, pursue a career...they're all coming back. And there is housing and jobs and dignity and respect and community and reunion and reconciliation.

“You shall see, and be radiant; and your heart shall thrill and rejoice.” And, to paraphrase Isaiah a bit to fit our context, the buffalo shall return. And the land will be rich and plenty.

You've known some hard times. You've had discouragement, fatigue and dwindling. You've know what it is to feel abandoned, abused, uncared for.

And this good news is for you. “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Lift up your eyes and look around; you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice.”

This is the promise for all of us, dear friends. As Christians we see this promise as a promise to all people everywhere fulfilled in Jesus, whose birth we celebrate and whose death gives us life. Jesus Christ is the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome. Jesus Christ is the one who brings us out of the deepest darkness, out of the worst despair because of his unprecedented love for us and for all creation.

I said at the beginning that I wanted to talk about 2 aspects of the story, and that the first was the before. Before Christ, waiting for Christ, hearing the promise, living in hope. The second is the response, illustrated today by the strange and exotic visitors in the Gospel of Matthew. Isaiah talked about kings coming to the “brightness of your dawn.”

Today, on Epiphany, we read of the Magi, the Wise Men, coming to find the baby Jesus by the brightness of his star. And, as they told Herod, “to pay him homage.”

As we put together the stories told about the birth of Jesus we discover that the shepherds were the first to come and honor him. Rough and tough, the shepherds were considered among the scruffier members of society, smelly, unwashed, living among the animals, tough enough to scare off wolves and lions. Not the usual visitors with newborn babies. But there, summoned by the angels.

And then this second set of visitors, equally unusual, summoned by a star, this awkward group of scholars, astronomers and anthropologists and professional dreamers of their day, I figure, going on a quest, following a star.

There are a couple of things that we learn from these Epiphany visitors. The first is that they are Gentiles, non-Jews. Their being a part of the Christmas story is a way of demonstrating that Jesus is for everybody—Jews and Gentiles, shepherds and kings, children and elders, Romans and Persians, women and men, Chippewa and Cree, Lutherans and Catholics. No longer are our brothers and sisters only people just like us. We are all children of God, we are all brothers and

sisters. We are brothers and sisters to the other congregations in the Montana Synod. We are brothers and sisters with the Christians being killed in India, and with the Hindus who are killing them. We are brothers and sisters with the Kikuyes burned in a church in Kenya. And we are brothers and sisters with the Luos, who are fighting with the Kikuyes. We are brothers and sisters on the reservation. And we are brothers and sisters in this congregation. That's the first Epiphany insight.

The second Epiphany insight is even though the Wise Men did not know exactly what they were looking for, they found it anyway. God led them by way of a star, and revealed to them what the real treasure was that they were searching for. And even though they did not understand it completely, they responded. They moved forward with a little knowledge and a lot of faith.

And the third Epiphany insight is that this is all risky business. By coming to see Jesus the Wise Men inadvertently alerted Herod to the threat to his power, and set up the massacre of the children of Bethlehem. Let's add Herod to Tim Giago's list of murderous despots. Sometimes witnessing takes us out of our comfort zone. Sometimes witnessing takes us into dangerous places. It took Jesus to the cross. For us.

Sisters and brothers, we are at a turning point at Our Saviour's. We have been through some dark times, and we are not out of the woods yet. But God is with us. God is calling us out of the darkness into the light. God is calling us through his son Jesus, who lived and died for us, so that we might have life. God is calling us to witness. God is calling us to live by faith. And God is calling us to take risks for the sake of the Gospel.

Amen

Bishop Jessica Crist
Epiphany, 2008