

In the name of the God who is revealed to us through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

We are now in the Church season of Epiphany. The word “epiphany” comes, “from (the) Greek ἐπιφάνεια (*epiphaineia*) to display, make manifest, ... to show¹.” In today’s Old Testament reading from the Prophet Isaiah, we get an epiphany that – to my way of thinking – is decidedly more important than any other epiphany in the Book. In the first part of Chapter 43, we hear these words:

I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
***Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,***

Now all of you who know me (and my preaching and teaching) know that I am not very fond of quoting Scripture out of context. So if you’ll bear with me just a couple of minutes, I’ll give you some background and we’ll try to put this message into perspective.

When Chapters 40-55 of Isaiah were written, it was approximately 50 years into the Babylonian exile. That means that for an entire generation, the Jews had been exiled and living in Babylonia (modern day Iraq), in servitude. So, most of the children of Israel had never seen Jerusalem and knew nothing of a life lived in worship of the God of all, YAHWEH at the Temple. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah deal with ***why*** the people

¹ Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary, <http://unabridged.merriam-webster.com/cgi-bin/unabridged?va=epiphany>

were conquered by the Babylonians – because they were sinful and deceitful people who did not trust and worship YAHWEH – and now that that sinful generation had died out, Isaiah tells their descendants that YAHWEH will rescue – or redeem – them and help them return to Jerusalem, their rightful home. So, in this 43rd chapter of Isaiah, the prophet is telling the people what YAHWEH is going to do for them, and why.

God tells the people not to be afraid because, “I have redeemed you.” In ancient Judaism, that was a very specific term, with a very specific meaning. Ancient Jews worshiped through sacrifices made at the Temple. If the community sinned by being unfaithful to YAHWEH, atonement could be made through sacrifice. A bull was sacrificed for the sins of the High Priest. Then a goat was sacrificed for the sins of the community. The blood of both the bull and the goat was used to wash down, or cleanse the altar and the sanctuary; and then a second goat – known as the scapegoat – had the sins assigned to it and was thereafter released into the wilderness, carrying the community’s sins with it. This was known as a sacrifice that ransomed the community – one in which those who were captive to sin were redeemed or bought back by the atoning sacrifice at the Temple. Now – back to Isaiah.

The Israelites had sinned in the sight of YAHWEH and therefore YAHWEH allowed them to be conquered and sent into exile by the Babylonians. Then a generation later, they had served their sentence and they atoned for their sins. Then YAHWEH told Isaiah that the children were loved and that’s why they were being redeemed from their

captivity. YAHWEH told the prophet that HE (YAHWEH) would give Egypt, Ethiopia and Seba as a ransom for the freedom of Israel. How that was to be carried out, we don't know. But suffice to say that God loved God's children so much that God was willing to give up something of great value in order to redeem the children – to pay the price of their captivity – in order to set them free.

Are you starting to see a pattern emerge here?

What is the most famous line from the Gospels? John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life².” This is a statement that that love which YAHWEH expressed to the prophet Isaiah concerning the children of Israel has translated to the same love for us and for the whole world.

God loved Israel so much that – like a good parent – God allowed Israel to suffer punishment for its sins, so that the people could learn their lesson and become better followers and lovers of God. But it didn't work. In fact, nothing that God did or did not do ever seemed to change the *hearts* of the children of Israel. And that's what God wanted, loving hearts not obedient servants. So God decided to give humanity an epiphany about who and what God really was.

² NRSV

And God became human – through a completely human birth-mother – and lived among us. Now here comes the part where we connect the contextual dots. Because God loves us, God gave up the most precious thing God had – the only Son.

Instead of using a bull and two goats, God gave the only Son – the Incarnation of God – to be handed over to the High Priest, Caiaphas – for sacrifice. And in order to redeem not only the Jews, but the Gentiles as well, Caiaphas handed Jesus over to the Gentile Governor, Pilate. And Jesus was lifted onto the cross just as a bull and a goat would have been lifted onto the sacrificial altar. Jesus laid down His life so that his blood could cleanse the sanctuaries of the world. And Jesus became the scapegoat of the world – taking the sins of the whole world onto his shoulders – carrying our inequities into the wilderness so that we could live a new life without those burdens.

God loves us! God loves you. And God loves me. The God of all creation, the YAHWEH of ancient Israel, the Allah of Islam, the Incarnate God of Christianity – **the one and only true God of the universe LOVES US!**

I know that sometimes, when things get tough, it doesn't feel like what I'm saying is true. There is probably not a person here today who has not lost a loved one to death. If you live long enough yourself, it is inevitable. But no matter how inevitable it may be, it hurts. There are some among us who have had serious, life-threatening illnesses ourselves. And there are those who live with the ravages of illness or infirmity every day. There are many among you who have had other various tragedies in your lives –

events that have completely altered your view of the world, or of yourself, forever. In all of these things, we are often tempted to scream at God, “How could you let this happen to *me*?!” “I believed in you. I worshiped you. I gave you what I had and this is how you repay me?” Let me make it crystal clear right now, when you hurt and when you feel abandoned, it is perfectly OK to yell those things at God. You will not go to hell for doing so – just blame me if there’s ever a problem with that.

Let me say it again, God loves you! And you ask yourself, “How much can God love me, if God is able to create the world and yet couldn’t help me – or my child – or my spouse – or my parent – or my friend?” God loves you enough to allow you to live your life. And that’s a gift. God didn’t bring calamity down on your life – those things just happen because we have this costly free will and that has led to many broken places in the world. But God loves you – just as you love those who are close to you. You may have watched someone you love suffer and you knew that the only thing you could do for them was to love them through the pain. It’s the same way between God and us. God loves us enough to stay with us and love us through the pain, even when we can’t have things changed to suit our liking.

God became Incarnate to redeem the world from sin and death. But there was another wonderful benefit of this Epiphany. When God became Incarnate, the God of all creation lived as we do. That means that, through Jesus, God suffered as humans do. Through Jesus, God suffered the death of a father. The Gospel writers don’t tell us about

it, but we have to believe that Joseph died during Jesus' lifetime. Through Jesus, God also felt the loss of a dear friend when Lazarus died and John tells us that Jesus wept³. And as He was hanging there on the cross – naked, beaten, spat upon, humiliated and alone – through Jesus, the God of all creation knew what physical pain, fear, disappointment and abandonment felt like.

God loves you enough to have gone through all of that in order to grant you entrance into the Kingdom of God and into eternal life – but God also went through all of that so that when you are going through it, you know that there is someone else who truly knows how you feel and will listen to you.

Call on the Lord, Jesus Christ. Tell Him your fears, angers, hurts and frustrations. Lay those things at His feet and, in the words of the Psalmist: “The LORD shall give strength to his people; *the LORD shall give his people the blessing of peace.” - that peace which “passes all understanding.” The peace which comes from resting in the love of God Incarnate. Amen.

³ John 11:35