

Epiphany V Year A

“You shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.”

Several days ago while visiting a friend in Atlanta my mother slipped and fell and broke her collarbone. We got word that she was being driven home to Dothan by an employee of her friend... we were told that she said she wasn't about to go to any emergency room in Atlanta....don't know what that's about. I tried to call her on her new cell phone....She said, “hello,” I said Mama are you O.K.... “hello” she repeated....I raised my voice....Mama, this is Jim, I'm calling to see if you are O.K.... “hello” she said....so I hung up and tried again.... “hello.” Mama, can you hear me now?.... “hello” Turns out after talking to her at home Friday she discovered that her cell phone volume was turned down way too low....I could go on about my mother's epic sagas with cell phones....or with her car keys or reading glasses for that matter....She was visiting a famed garden in Atlanta where she slipped...she was much more upset by the shape the garden was in than her collarbone.

But this fairly minor accident caused me to think about her all day Friday. Katharine and I have had to remind each other a lot lately, whenever she does something, or says something quite out of the ordinary, more eccentric than usual (which can be pretty eccentric)....we have to remind each other that after all, she is getting old....she's 78 (which is sounding younger and younger to me these days).

But really in hindsight I've been thinking a lot about her lately....all the things she has taught me....given me....and in my thinking I have remembered one particular thing she said many years ago, twenty or so years ago, she said to me while we were listening to John Rutter's Requiem, that beautiful piece of music....It was during the part in which the familiar words from the Burial Rite were sung... “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord...for they rest from their labors.” Hmm! She said as if she had discovered something she'd not known before....an epiphany there in the den of our house....she said I've always wondered about that line in the burial rite about resting from our labors....It's never really made any sense to me...what labor?...what rest?...Is dying merely resting from the leaden burden of life?...but now I know what it means she said blithely....I waited....she said, “we rest from bearing God's life to the world...that's who we are...we are bearers of God's life...all of us on this earth”...and finally she said, “we rest from the good work we've been given to do”....I

think she's right....that our singular vocation is to bear God's life and light to a world beset by the dark.

The lectionary gurus get it right from time to time...and these past two Sundays of Epiphany I think they've gotten it right. Epiphany (a Greek derivative) meaning manifestation, revelation, or I think better translated.... realization. In Epiphany our readings seek to help us realize who this Christ is... In our Gospel readings we began last Sunday with the beginning of Jesus' sermon on the mountain (In Luke it's on the plain)...and as a backdrop to this most important and probably most studied section of Matthew's gospel (which is really not a sermon, but a teaching)...we hear from the Old Testament prophets Micah and Isaiah (Micah last Sunday, Isaiah, this Sunday) who both in their respective chosen passages sum up what it means to be people of faith which is exactly the subject upon which Jesus is teaching: Micah writes:

"With what shall I come before the LORD,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"
He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

We have been told dear brothers and sisters what is required of us...the mystery is ours for the knowing....And then we hear from Isaiah (Isaiah the several prophets overlapping the time of Micah during the Judean monarchy) We just read from Isaiah who is writing to the Judeans who have begun repatriating Judea after their captivity in Babylon: my paraphrasing: Here is the fast I (God) require (as opposed to your institutional prostrations).... Here is the fast I require: To break down injustice...to relieve the burden of oppression...to feed the hungry...to take care of the homeless and naked...and by the way treat your own kin with respect... there's a tough one!...Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing will spring up quickly....and when you cry for help, God will say, here I am....your living lives of sacrifice will be a light in the dark as if it were noon....you will be strong and flourish like a watered garden....and your ruin....those broken pieces of our lives along the way...

disappointments, tragedies... griefs... regrets... mistakes... the pieces of our lives, our very ruin, the prophet says will be rebuilt, redeemed,...the broken foundation of what our forbears left us is forever restored...life is not for naught...and we, we brothers and sisters begin our second life, which is our baptismal life... that we now are the repairers of the breach...the restorers of streets to live in...I love that image, restorers of streets to live in... reminds me of the rebuilding in New Orleans and Haiti...restorers of streets, restorers of a way, restorers of dignity and a way ahead.... We the ones to continue God's saving and restoring work in the world....mending the tear between heaven and earth, a tear that was never meant to be...repairers of the breach...restorers of streets to live in....advocates for God's project of restoration of the world.

This, dear friends, is a treatise on Love....how love operates...Love not a passive emotion, but love a way of life....and it works like this: That we are loved by God from the beginning beyond our knowing, our brokenness notwithstanding....So to know that love, then we must love as God loves...and that dynamic we are told bears great bounty and healing and joy...repairers of the breach, our mantle...reconcilers of heaven and earth, no less...and we, so says the promise, we are restored as well in our work of restoring...that is good news....a realization of the truth of who Christ is and therefore who we are....people made for love.

Jesus of course is teaching the same thing...He's reiterating in his own day and in his own contemporary circumstances the foundations of the faith, faith handed down to him from his ancestors, in the lore of his people, by his father, his mother...here, Jesus as always, pointing beyond himself to a way of life, a time tested way of life, the foundation of generations as Isaiah puts it... Last week, as the sermon/the teaching on the mountain begins, we read the so-called beatitudes...the blessings that come of living a life of faith...living lives of faith is what Jesus is teaching: you who thirst for justice, you who show mercy and compassion, you who give all for the cause, you who make peace...then you will be comforted from all manner of grief and sorrow and you will know God in your own day....and in Matthew 22 Jesus teaches that loving neighbor is the same as loving one's self and loving God....and in 25....heal the sick he says, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, feed the hungry, visit the imprisoned, and you've loved God in the process.....Jesus handing down to a new generation the lore of how to live lives of love....Jesus telling those who would but come...disciples, learners...people of the faith, people of conscience.... Jesus is telling them who they are....you are God-bearers he tells them....you bear God's life... It's who you are....you've forever been told, remember?

And in our passage today he tells his followers something more....you are salt and light...two things without which we die....two rudiments of life, rudiments of creation.....so Jesus raises the bar as far as the bar can be raised....As God-bearers, you are vital for the world's very existence.... without salt and light there is no world....this ministry of ours brothers and sisters is vital, as vital as salt, as vital as light....so let us realize, επιφινήον... that in and through our vocation as God-bearers, repairers of the breach, restorers of streets to live in, menders of the collective brokenness of our world...in and through our following on this ancient and sacred way, the world carries on towards its perfection...a day perhaps in God's time that is soon upon us.....This is our sacred vocation, dear people of God... This is who we are...and one day, may we with a brimful conscience, rest from such honored labor.