

“An Epiphany For All Time”

In the name of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, grace to you and peace.

This morning, my friends, for reasons I am not entirely sure why, I want to share with you where I have been on my faith journey. Perhaps it is to encourage you to look at your own faith journey. For whatever reason, on the faith journey we all are one, I pray that each of us are open to change, open to what God might be saying to us.

This morning we find ourselves in the Second Sunday of the Epiphany season, a season of the church year which, as I age, is becoming a favourite season of mine. It's a season in which whether it be the visit of the wise men, or Jesus changing water into wine as we heard in today's gospel reading, it's a season in which God's power, God's light, God's love are constantly being revealed to us.

The word Epiphany comes from a root meaning to reveal or make known. I believe our lives are full of epiphanies in which we discover God's purpose for us. This morning I want to talk about such an epiphany that radically changed and shaped my faith journey as a Christian.

It began with a trip to Israel in 1986. We were a small group of 15 Lutheran clergy and we had travelled through Israel and the West Bank for a week before we finally came to Jerusalem. Early one beautiful, cool but sunny morning, in late November, we stood on Mount Zion and surveyed the scene before us.

Directly in front of us was the Western Wall more commonly called the Wailing Wall, the sole remnant of the magnificent Jewish temple that once stood there. Up close to it were many orthodoxly dressed Jews bowing reverently and saying their prayers. To the right was the beautiful architecture of a Mosque considered to be the third most revered site of Islam. To the left, was the huge Mosque of the Golden Dome, built over the gigantic Rock on which it was believed Abraham had been ready to sacrifice Isaac, and from which Muslims believe the prophet Mohammed had ascended into heaven. Worshipers and tourists were streaming everywhere. Our guide was chattering away, but I was deep in my own thoughts,

In our travels we had met Jews and Arabs and Palestinian Christians and had come to understand, or at least tried to understand, many of their concerns and anguish. Of course, any pilgrim to Jerusalem, out of respect goes to the Holocaust memorial museum in Jerusalem called Vad Vashem. We had also seen a huge display at the University of Tel Aviv that graphically depicted the terrible ghetto existence that had been forced on the Jews since their Diaspora from Israel in 70 A.D. A persecution mostly by Christians!

We also had come to keenly feel the plight of the Palestinians who felt that they had become prisoners and were less than second-class citizens in their own land.

Of course, along with that, we had been thrilled to visit many sites and places that were identified as being part of the life of Jesus. Including, Cana, where today's gospel story of Jesus changing the water into wine took place. To this day, I can't help but smile when I think of the hucksters who were trying to sell small bottles of wine to gullible pilgrims and tourists, saying it dated from the time of Jesus.

Anyways, all of this was going through my mind. And a stirring feeling went through me that here, at this very spot, I was standing on holy ground, a spot on which I could say, three great religions had been born, Judaism, Christianity, Islam. Three universal religions that all proclaimed that

there was one God who was all-powerful, just, loving, and merciful. Wow! But that feeling was almost immediately replaced by an even greater epiphany. An epiphany that tore at my heart and pierced my soul.

Three great monotheistic faiths who claim to worship the one true God, holy and gracious and yet its followers have terrible, murderous, unthinkable deeds to each other. Why, why, why? That was a question that troubled me then and still troubles me, 27 years later. One conclusion that I came to was that it was because we human beings have tried to make religion, faith, an exclusive club, whereas God means it to be inclusive. God sent God's light, God's spirit, God's truth, into the whole world, past and present and revealed that for all humanity, whether through creation, or conscience, or scripture. And we, each in our own faith or tribe have wanted to say, we have the whole right on that light, that spirit, that truth. The rest of you are mostly outside. You are the lost, we are the saved. You are in error, we are the true believers. And, yes, we are ready to deal violently with you, and sometimes in love, to show you the error of your ways. How that must break God's heart!

Friends, I've had to struggle with that epiphany. How many times in my life have I read with all sincerity those words recorded in John where Jesus says, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no one comes to the Father but by me." Must I give those up? No, for that claim is true for me. It is by the person and life and teachings of Jesus the Christ that I have come to know the Eternal One, a gracious God, who has made me his child, knows me inside out, the good and the bad for I have both, who still loves me and forgives me. God daily cares for me and has prepared a heavenly home for me. But, I make that divine Creator far too small if I restrict the revelation of God's justice and grace to my Christian experience alone. God has shone God's light, poured God's spirit, into the whole world and who am I to restrict it to my faith and experience alone.

As I said earlier, this has been a soul-changing epiphany for me and I want to stress that I have spoken very personally as Doug Reble and not as Pastor Doug Reble, as a spokesperson for Zion or our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

But I was delighted to read the following quote from an American Lutheran publication preparing us for the Epiphany season. Here's the quote, which refers to the Sunday lessons for Epiphany: "One simply cannot ignore the evidence in these readings that Jesus was consistently breaking down walls between tribes, between women and men, between the powerful and the marginalized, between Gentiles and Jews, family and stranger, clean and unclean."

And then the writer goes on to say that our own tribalism or exclusiveness today is still challenged by Jesus' fierce inclusiveness. Again I quote: "We cannot blithely accept our defensive loyalty to family, school, denomination, neighbourhood, class, gender, religion, country, or any other tribe of exclusion in the face of Jesus' teaching and actions." To which I simply add, "Praise be to God."

My brothers and sisters in Christ, my brothers and sisters who journey in faith with me. The challenge for you and me is to live that love, live that inclusiveness. Love our God, love our neighbour – whoever he or she might be. If we do, it's likely that you and I will be able to change our lives and the lives of others from water into wine. In the name of the God who loves us all. AMEN.