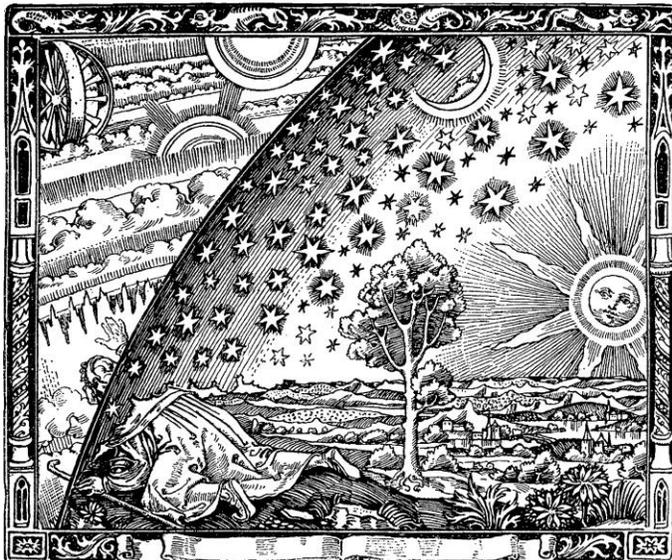


Praying for Epiphany
A sermon preached
at Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church
Edmonton, Alberta
by Carol Penner
July 27, 2014
Text: Matthew 2:1-23, Ecclesiastes 4:1-3

An epiphany, according to the dictionary, is “a sudden, intuitive insight into the essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple or commonplace experience.” It’s come into our common language from the church, because Epiphany originally referred to the event of the Wise men arriving from the East to see the baby Jesus. Epiphany is usually celebrated on January 6th, the twelfth day of Christmas. Epiphany comes from the Greek word *epiphaneia* which means sudden manifestation or appearance of God, or the sudden realization of God’s presence.



The picture that you are seeing is from the 1800s, one artist’s attempt to explain what an epiphany is. You are in your ordinary everyday world, but suddenly, you get out of your own headspace into a larger reality, where you can see the meaning behind things, the gears, the workings of the world. I like the image of him poking his head out of our world and into a wider world.

The wise men, when they see the baby Jesus, have an epiphany. The king that they came expecting to see, wasn’t quite what they expected. They had gone to Herod’s palace, but Jesus wasn’t there. Jesus, this great king, was found in a simple, homely, commonplace place. He was a different kind of king. The wise men get a glimpse of not of an earthly kingdom, but of the kingdom of God.

Surprisingly, Matthew 2 combines a story of violence with the wise men’s epiphany. Now usually when we read the story of the wise men in church, we don’t preach about the slaughter of the babies in Bethlehem, even though it is part of the same story. We don’t like to talk about it because we usually

read these verses at Christmas. At Christmas we lovingly remember Jesus lying in the manger, and the angels singing about peace on earth, and the stars twinkling in the sky. Who wants to focus on evil King Herod and the murdered babies! But the scripture ties these two things together; epiphany comes in the context of violence, in the context of murder.

Now you may be wondering why we are reading a Christmas story in the middle of summer, why we have a picture of the wise men on our bulletin in July! Here's why. Like many of you, these past few weeks I've been horrified by the images in the news from Gaza. This story from Matthew's gospel connects with those images, because Jesus was a child refugee in Gaza. As Mary and Joseph fled from King Herod and his murdering soldiers, they headed toward Egypt. It was a huge journey, a giant trek for a young couple, something mostly only traders or the political elite would undertake. Ordinary people stayed put in those days. It is highly unlikely that Joseph would have set out across the wilderness heading to Egypt. He didn't know the way, and there was no food or water in the wilderness. There were no Best Western Mediterranean Inns or Sandals resorts in the wilderness that you could stay in. Undoubtedly he took the main road from Judea to Egypt, which went straight through the city of Gaza.

Jesus was a child refugee in Gaza. We can see Jesus' face in the many children in Gaza today. And the weeping of the parents in Bethlehem described in our scripture resonates with so many images we've seen in the last few weeks of Israeli and Arab parents wailing. "A voice was heard in Rama, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children, she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

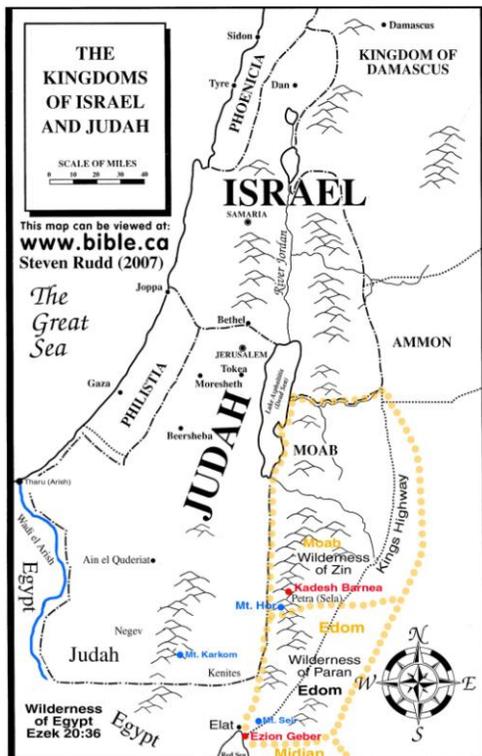
The epiphany of the wise men was associated with political violence. I wonder whether epiphanies are possible in a war zone like Gaza. Can God appear in the midst of violence? Can we find insight in a place as conflicted as Gaza?

Let me give you a bit of background about Gaza, this war zone that Jesus walked through long ago. Gaza is an ancient city, which has had continuous human habitation for over 3000 years. It was occupied long before the pyramids were built. Gaza was important because it was on the main road from Egypt to Asia.



Because of its' importance in the area, it's no surprise that it's mentioned over 20 times in the Bible. It was a prosperous city, benefitting from the trade route it was on. The book of Amos tells us that Gaza was known as a city of slave traders. Human traffickers found the convenient location on this road to be good for business. Joseph, sold into slavery into Egypt by his brothers, would have been carried down this road through Gaza. When the Israelites return to the Promised Land many years later, scripture mentions Gaza as one of the five major cities of the Philistines. When Samson was betrayed by Delilah, the Philistines took Samson to Gaza and it's there he pulled the building down on top of them. Much later, in the New Testament, Philip meets the Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza.

Because of its strategic location, Gaza was in the crosshairs of every major empire that ever ruled in the Middle East.



Six centuries before Jesus, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon swept through Israel, conquering it, destroying Jerusalem and deporting a large majority of the population to Babylon. It's called the Babylonian exile in Jewish history. But Nebuchadnezzar didn't just single out Israel for special treatment, other countries along that same corridor between Egypt and Asia faced the same thing. Archaeological documents show that the king of Gaza was also captured at the same time and his people were deported by Nebuchadnezzar too. Rulers wanted to control the whole seaboard, and its strategic road.

Because Israel and Gaza were in such strategic locations, they faced many invasions. Gaza's history is just as complicated as Israel. In the ancient world, Gaza was owned and fought over by the Canaanites, the Egyptians, the Philistines, the Israelites, the Assyrians. Alexander the Great besieged the city. It was conquered by the Hasmoneans, then became part of the Roman and then the Byzantine empire. By the 600s it had become a thriving mostly Christian city, all the pagan temples were closed. Various Muslim Arab states then controlled it for the next few hundreds of years, with their rule being successfully challenged by various Crusader armies coming from Europe. It was invaded by the Mongols, then came under Arab control, it became the home of a thriving Jewish community. It was part of the Ottoman empire, then part of Egypt, and then in the 1900s after World War I it came under British control.

Gaza sounds very important, considering how many people have fought over it. It can seem like a very big place because of its' dramatic history, and because we hear about it so often in the news. But the area that people call Gaza now, or the Gaza Strip, which includes Gaza City, is actually a very small place. The area of Gaza is only 360 square kilometers. That's just over half the size of Edmonton.

Half the size of Edmonton. I want you to think about that, when you hear other facts about Gaza. Things changed dramatically for Gaza after the 1948 Arab/Israeli war. When the Israeli army invaded Palestine, the Palestinians fled from the violence. 200,000 refugees poured into Gaza. You can imagine; what would life in Edmonton be like if 200,000 refugees descended upon us. Arrived suddenly within a few weeks and months into half of our city (because remember Gaza is just over half the size of Edmonton). It would substantially change our life in the city here. Those refugees were never allowed to go home.

Today 1.8 million people live in Gaza, a million of them still classified as refugees, because they are children or grandchildren of people who fled the fighting in 1948. I read a statistic that 40% of the population of Gaza is under 15.

I hope that provides a bit of context for understanding the stories we are hearing from Gaza. Can we picture ourselves in their shoes? Imagine if an invading army with tanks and guns and bombs and helicopters was invading the northern part of Edmonton. We hear the shelling, the rumours fly of the tanks coming closer and closer, what is going to be bombed next? Will it be in Sherwood Park or Belgravia? No one knows. All sorts of people come streaming down the main roads to live with us. The thing is, none of us can flee the violence completely. You can't drive to Beaumont or Devon or Nisku, you can't even walk there because the borders are closed, locked. You can't get out. You can't leave Edmonton and Edmonton is under attack. That's what it is like in Gaza. Gaza is under military occupation

and the borders have been shut for 7 years. For those of you with small children, or who are caring for elderly relatives who can't walk, what would you do to keep them safe, to protect them from violence?

Can we picture ourselves in the shoes of the families of the Israeli soldiers? There is compulsory military service for almost every Israeli young man and woman. It is extremely difficult to claim conscientious objector status in Israel. These young people are sent into a war they did not create, but which they must fight. What happens to young people when they are ordered to shoot into residential areas, when snipers have to shoot unarmed people, when gunners on a naval destroyer take aim at children playing on a beach and blow them to pieces, and then aim a second shell at children who run away from the first explosion, and kill them too. Only time will tell the trauma that these soldiers will live with for the rest of their lives.

That's the context. Where do we find epiphany, where do we meet God, or understand God in the face of violence like what is happening in Gaza. When we turn to scripture, the words of the Teacher from the book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 4 seem to describe the situation best,

Again, I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Look, the tears of the oppressed—with no one to comfort them! On the side of their oppressors there was power—with no one to comfort them. And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 4:1-3)

I've heard people talk about the book of Ecclesiastes, and they don't like it because it can be pretty bleak. I think it is very observational, and resonates with many people in hard situations. Evil deeds are done under the sun, especially in war. People descend lower and lower into hatred and revenge and more hatred and revenge. Is life worth living when people are acting in less than human ways?

This week I saw pictures of a hospital in Gaza that was bombed. Israel claims that there were Hamas fighters in the hospital, which may very well have been the case. But do the people in the hospital beds have any control over who is fighting where? Can the child in a coma in the hospital bed, ask the Hamas fighters to leave? What are doctors to do? They are already trying to help people without modern medical equipment, without electricity and without water. How can a hospital of critically ill people be evacuated, when every other hospital is filled to overflowing? And how safe is it to evacuate if ambulances are being shot at, because they might have a Hamas fighter in them?

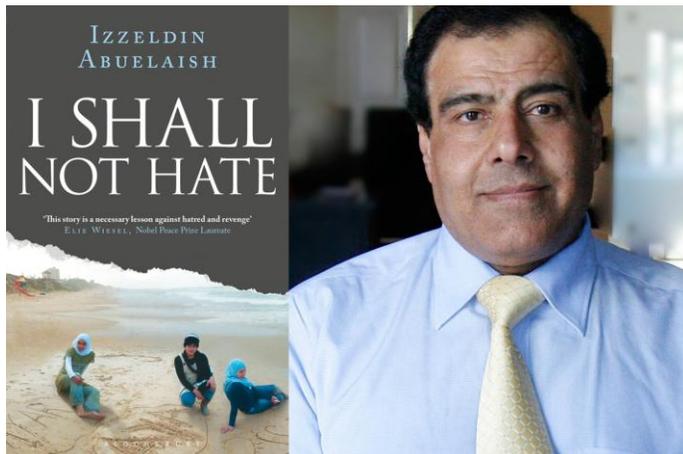
Again using the Edmonton analogy, how would we feel if numerous hospitals in Edmonton were bombed precisely at the moment when in the last two weeks 4500 seriously injured people have totally overwhelmed those hospitals. No one can leave Edmonton to get medical treatment in other places, and medical supplies are running low. How low have we stooped when we are firing missiles into hospitals filled with injured people?

The political problems of Israel and Palestine are huge and the whole world, it seems, is engaged in trying to decide whose fault it is. What violence justifies what violence. Playing the blame game will never end, because there is no end to horrible atrocities.

Our minds start to spin with such intractable problems. Like the Teacher from Ecclesiastes, when faced with huge evils, we can wonder about the meaning of life. Like the person in the picture we looked at, when faced with huge evils, we want to poke our heads outside the atmosphere of hate and suspicion and get a glimpse of a different reality. What does this all mean? Where can we see the face of Jesus? Is epiphany possible in Gaza?

Epiphanies come sometimes in the midst of terrible pain. They come in ordinary situations...not always in front of cameras, or when important people sit down for summits and proclamations. The latest flare up in Gaza was ignited by the torture and murder of three Israeli boys. A few days later a Palestinian boy was kidnapped, tortured and murdered. Rockets started flying through the sky, tanks started invading. Violence snowballed from there, galloping out of control. That's been the main show on TV every day for weeks.

But there are other stories, smaller stories, that don't hit the mainstream media. Something important happened the week after those boys were killed. Parents of one of the three Jewish boys who was murdered, met with parents of the Palestinian boy who had been murdered. Yishai Fraenkel, the uncle of the murdered Jewish boy said, "...the life of an Arab is equally precious to that of a Jew. Blood is blood and murder is murder, whether that murder is Jewish or Arab." People, in the midst of great pain, walking in other people's shoes. Realizing, "My pain is not unique." Jew and Arab are both suffering. This violence must end.



This week I read the memoir of Izzeldin Abuelaish, a physician from Gaza who has a remarkable story. The book is titled "I Shall Not Hate: A Gaza Doctor's Journey". He grew up in terrible poverty as a refugee in Gaza, but the kindness of individuals, including Arab and Jew, encouraged him to become a doctor. As a doctor, he dedicated his career to nurturing life. Nurturing the lives not just of Palestinians,

but also Israelis. During the last uprising in Gaza, three of his daughters and his niece were killed in a tank attack on his home.

It is a riveting and harrowing and inspiring story. Abuelaish lived through so many atrocities, he was surrounded by hatred and revenge. Yet he chooses not to hate. He has become an ambassador for peace. He writes, "I understand down to my bones that violence is futile, a waste of time, lives and resources, and has been proven to beget more violence....There's only one way to bridge the divide, to live together, to realize the goals of two peoples." (p. 174 of "I Shall Not Hate") So much of his work involves trying to get people to put themselves in their enemies' shoes. He tells his story so that people can put themselves into the reality of people living in Gaza. To feel their pain.

Abuleish, somehow, is able to stick his head out through the fog of hatred and revenge, and get a glimpse of the larger meaning of things. His faith in Allah, the love of his family, his community, his friends and colleagues, both Arab and Jew, all give him a leg up, all let him stand on their shoulders, to keep his eyes on the power of love.

I think it's an epiphany that the world is waiting for, longing for, desperate for. We can feel that hatred and revenge are the most powerful forces on earth. But in fact it's the power of love which triumphs, and is stronger than any hate.



This is a picture I took of the separation wall between Israel and the West Bank. I was struck by the words "Love Wins" The kingdom of God is all around us, available to everyone at every moment. Jesus came to earth to tell us about that love, and no hatred, no power on earth was stronger than the power of that love. Nothing we could do could make Jesus hate us. He died on the cross loving us. At the beginning of his life, and at the end, in the midst of murder, an epiphany. God is with us. Love wins. Love is stronger than evil.

What does epiphany mean for us this week? For me, it means that I don't descend into hatred. I don't hate Israeli or Palestinian. I see pain on both sides of a political struggle. I am praying for peace and reconciliation.

Epiphany also means that I don't divorce myself from the pain that is happening in this conflict. Jesus came and lived in our dangerous world, he didn't run away from us. I am tempted to run away. Just turn the page or turn the channel and say, "Not my problem. Middle east peace? Good luck with that!" Instead, I choose compassion because that's the path that Jesus taught. That's part of my strategy in comparing Gaza to Edmonton this morning. I wanted you to try on for size the shoes of the people of Gaza. To feel the pain of the parents in Gaza seeing their families blown up and their homes destroyed. To feel the pain of Israeli parents, who fear random rocket fire, and that their children will be killed or scarred for life by serving in the military.

Epiphany means I don't descend into despair. There is a way through even the most complicated political quagmires, a way to peace. It comes when people, in the midst of great pain, turn to each other and see that we are all in this together.

Epiphany means that I realize the dangers of racism, the dangers of "us and them" thinking, and that our own society is not immune from terrible violence. I am called by Jesus to be scrupulous in my thinking and my actions, to not perpetuate hatred, but to promote love.

It's a dangerous world. A newborn baby in a bed of hay, twinkling stars, a message of peace. So beautiful. There are soldiers on the way, with sharp swords. There will be blood and tears in Bethlehem. Blood and tears thirty years later in Jerusalem. Epiphany is that it's God's world, and that means it's a hopeful world. Out of every bloody murder, we are given opportunities to change, to say no to violence, to work for peace.

God give us strength to do that work, and to pray for our conflicted and suffering brothers and sisters in Israel and Gaza.