

Grace Lutheran Community, 3rd January, 2021: Commemoration of Epiphany

Like the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day,
so was the appearance of the surrounding radiance.
Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.

Ezekiel 1:28 (NASB)

Prayer: Dear Jesus, You are the light of the world. May we have eyes to see You, and ears to hear You. In Your name we pray. Amen.

Each year on the 6th of January most Christians around the world commemorate "The Epiphany", that is, remembering the visit of the 'Wise Men' (Magi) who wished to see 'the One born to be King of the Jews'. The Biblical account of this is recorded in the Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 2, verses 1 to 12.

"Epiphany" is an important Festival for us. In one of the other Bible Readings for this day (Isaiah 60:1-6) we read, "Nations will come to Your light, and kings to the brightness of Your radiance." In other words, all people of the earth will come to know the one true God. And they will know of God because of Jesus.

But in our world today, there are still many people who ask what God is like. Some time ago Billy Graham said this: A leading Los Angeles businessman asked me: "What do you suppose God is like?" An airline flight attendant once asked, as we were skimming over the beautiful Rocky Mountains from Denver to Los Angeles: "Wouldn't it be fine if we really knew what God was like?" A university president put it this way: "If it were possible for preachers to tell people what God is and what God is like, it would make the question of religion a good deal simpler for many people."

In some way the question of what God is like is valid, and will offer a great variety of answers. The reason for this is that we all are different people with different experiences, and so the way God will intersect and interact with us in our lives will be different. If you ask people from one congregation what God is like, you will receive as many different answers as there are people at church. Even though they 'confess' the 'same God' in their Creed and Confessions and worship, their description will vary because of their 'experiences' of God. But this is the way it is when we meet any person. The same person will be described differently by different people, according to their experience with that person.

But the question of what God is like can have some very deep aspects to it. For those who are experiencing difficult times, those who have a chronic illness, those who have experienced relationship failures or abuse of some sort, those who have lost loved ones in accidents or illnesses or violent crimes, the question of 'What God is like' can be quite poignant and deep. Here the question of "What is God like?" is not an abstract philosophical exercise. It is a question to know someone who will actually 'be there' for you to meet the deepest need of your soul.

For some people in the world, the question of ‘What God is like’ will lead them to say that “There is no God. How can there be a ‘God’ with all of the suffering in the world?” You have probably heard someone say something like this at some time. When people say this, there are several things we may do. One is to ask a question, “If there is no God, how do you explain all the suffering in the world then?” Another very important thing to do is to pray for that person in your heart for the Holy Spirit to be at work in them and you. After all, it is the Holy Spirit who leads people to faith in Jesus. Thirdly, you may also recall various accounts in Bible of people’s response in times of trial and trouble.

In the Bible Reading for the sermon this day (Ezekiel 1:28) there is an important back-story. Ezekiel, as a descendant of Jacob's son Levi, is by profession a priest (Ezek. 1:2). However, his priesthood was violently interrupted when he was taken as a captive to Babylon in the first deportation of Jews from Jerusalem around 597 B.C. Five years later he lived in the Babylonian Jewish settlement of Tel Aviv (the hill of the storm god) by the Chebar River. It was there that he received his call to prophecy. For 22 years Ezekiel continued his ministry. In his early period as a prophet, he denounced his people for their sins and corruption. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 586, however, Ezekiel became the consoler and comforter of the exiles, holding out to them the promise of return to the homeland and the restoration of the Temple and of the throne of David. Ezekiel's loftiest vision, that of the Valley of Dry Bones (37:1-14), has rarely been matched in its grandeur.

One can imagine that for many people, being far from home and experiencing exile and the destruction of their Capital City, many must have doubted whether God was with them. How could the God of Israel let his country be captured and his people forced to endure exile? Most likely some of the Babylonians would have also mocked the Jews for their faith – “Where is your God now?” I’m sure they said.

In response to this, Ezekiel is given an incredible ‘vision’ of “God” (Ezekiel Chapter 1). The vision comes from a whirlwind from the north, and Ezekiel has a vision of the four living creatures with four wings (each touching the wing of another), and four faces (man, lion, ox, eagle), and of the four wheels-within-wheels full of eyes. Above them is the likeness of the heavens, where Ezekiel sees one with the appearance of a man sitting on a throne. And of the person on the throne Ezekiel said: “Just like the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day so was the appearance of brilliance that surrounded him. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.”

The vision given to Ezekiel here is an incredible vision. It has many elements that have cause a great debate amongst people. But if you imagine it like this. You are sitting on a beach, looking out to sea. Suddenly two small black dots appear on the horizon. Within a couple of seconds you hear a huge roar, and suddenly two fighter jets shoot right over your head, only a couple of hundred metres up. It all happens so fast, and there is sensory overload. Ezekiel must have had similar feelings when he saw God’s glory.

Ezekiel understood that he was seeing the “likeness” of things, not the reality. For instance, Ezekiel did not, and could not, see the glory of God as it really is. Rather Ezekiel beheld "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD" (Ezekiel 1:28). The four cherubim that Ezekiel saw in visions were symbols. (Note: there's a sequel to this vision in chapter 10, where the four living creatures are identified as cherubim). They portray God and His attributes. For example the creatures and wheels were full of eyes to represents God as all-wise, all-knowing, all-seeing. And the proceeding straight forward without turning symbolises God's absolute righteousness and truth from which He never turns aside. This is important, because God had made promises to the ancestors of the captives. The vision confirms to them that, despite their present circumstances, God keeps His promises, and the future for Israel is bright. This is represented by the firmament in the vision, and the rainbow that surrounded the one on the throne.

What is the point of this incredible vision? One Bible Commentator has described it this way (keeping in mind the exile of people in Babylon, and the impending destruction of Jerusalem): *"When people are consumed by insurmountable problems and buffeted by the storms of life, they usually do not need another perspective on their problems. What they do need is a new perspective on God as Lord of life and larger than all its difficulties. Humanity in peril needs a sense of the awesome majesty of God. There needs to be an awareness that God is greater than adversity. He is with his people in the midst of their problems. This was a need of both Ezekiel and the people to whom he ministered. They needed a new vision of and commitment to the holiness and majesty of God. For this reason the opening vision was crucial as the first revelation in the call of Ezekiel to be a prophet to the exiles... People often want to blame the storms of life on God and forget that human sin brought chaos in the world. This lack of accord is evident in the storms of nature as well as the storms of human nature. The only hope for humanity is to recognise God in the midst of the storms as one who can restore them to calm (cf Luke 8:24)."*

Ezekiel's prophetic ministry centred around a people uprooted from their homes and living in exile in a foreign land. Can you imagine the feelings of disorientation and confusion that accompanied these people? Even though many of the exiles were directly engaged in the sinful behaviour that led to God's judgment, that would not have prevented them from wondering why this was happening to them. We sometimes find ourselves asking as well, “Why, Lord?” and waiting in silence for the answer.

The exiles had to wait five years for God to send Ezekiel. When God did, He had a message that many people likely did not want to hear: God is the Lord of heaven and earth, and the judgment the people were experiencing was a result of their sin. But Ezekiel also speaks of God's amazing grace in the vision of the rainbow. The rainbow is mentioned only four times in Scripture (Gen.9:13, Ezek.1:28; Rev.4:3;10:1). In Genesis the rainbow followed the judgment, and was a sign of God's covenant never to destroy the earth by water. In Ezekiel and Revelation, the rainbow is a sign of God's glorious presence, and in the context of its use in

Genesis, it is a reminder that God's mercy will triumph. After a storm we look for rainbows, and are usually excited when we see them.

In the Gospel for Epiphany (Matthew 2:1-12) the Magi "from the east" ask, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews?" Just by asking this question, they herald the New Light that has dawned on all people. And we hear that when they approached Bethlehem, "They saw the star, and rejoiced exceedingly with great joy."

What is God like? Ezekiel's revelation reminds us that we are to have a grand vision of God. After all, God is the Maker of the Universe in its infinite grandeur and mystery. And if you think about it carefully for a moment, it is impossible for human, finite minds to understand an infinite universe-making God completely. But in the Bible we have a true revelation of what God is really like. And the fullness of this revelation is seen in Jesus. In 2 Corinthians 4:6 we read: "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ."

We know that God's glory shines fully in Jesus. One of the names given to Jesus is "Immanuel," which means "God with us." When Jesus was on Earth, God was on Earth. When Jesus healed, God healed. When Jesus forgave sinners, God forgave sinners. When Jesus loved, God loved. When Jesus experienced death, God experienced death (think about that for a moment!). When Jesus was raised from the dead with a glorified body, God raises for us a newness of life.

We find the rainbow in the beginning, middle, and end of scripture. Near the beginning in Genesis, God sends a rainbow as His covenant that He will never again flood all the earth as punishment for human sin. In the middle, in Ezekiel, the rainbow symbolises the coming of Christ, as well as to declare the glory of God. And in Revelation (4:3), at the end of God's Word, John described Christ as "clothed with a cloud and a rainbow on His head," a symbol of peace and reconciliation with God.

There is much up in the air in this world right now. But we have one constant, one place where we will find shelter from the troubles of the day, one place that will always welcome us. And that is in our Lord and Saviour. When the storms come or trouble strikes, often we can't see beyond what is happening, and we are paralysed with fear. But Jesus says (Luke 21:28), 'When these things begin to happen, stand up, look up.' Look at the rainbow of promise. Jesus is there, even in the chaos. See God's hand in it all, and look for the rainbow. Amen.

LORD God, loving Father: through a child born in Bethlehem, You open to us the treasure of Your grace. Help us to see and feel the presence of Your light as we step into another Year. Let Your light shine everywhere, and guide us in the way of Your Son, that all peoples may praise You. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.