

## Epiphany III Year A 2026

Shall I repeat myself? The problem is empire. It always has been; it is now; and it always will be. In a world, on a planet that has a more than adequate abundance for sustaining life, it is institutional power that disrupts the artful balance of such bounty, the balance of abundance God created in the very beginning. Poverty isn't a natural condition. It is manufactured, if you will, by the powerful. Warfare is not natural, making the term "Just War" an obscene oxymoron. War, especially with its modern exponential violence, is not a conflict between nations of people. War is manufactured between institutional powers under the pretense of justice, but at the behest of greed. Poverty and warfare are quite simply the means of abuse and control by the powers and principalities of our world. And now, in our own country, we are witnessing war waged against our own citizens by the president's personal para-military, making a mockery of the U.S. Constitution, and, for that matter, all that is good and true. We should have seen this coming given our love of wealth, and the idea of American exceptionalism. We should have paid attention to the patterns of history, and the ill-gotten gains by empires come before us. Our beloved country is in fact, not an exception, but one more example that proves the rule. But I'm repeating myself.

When the Gospel scribes speak of salvation, they are not speaking of going to heaven instead of going to hell contingent on a belief system. Believe in Jesus and you will have immortality. That was manufactured by the institutional church as a means of control. Salvation, according to New Testament literature, is a way of living, a practice, by

which we may live a dignified and sustainable life up and against the corrupted powers of this world; a way to live with meaning and purpose, and with hope, in the face of the tyranny that would belie our very humanity. I have said before that salvation is about our neighbor. That's true as to our mission. But perhaps a better way to say it is that salvation is about an invitation to community; a community of equals... a community that tells the hard truth, a community that practices gratitude, a community of compassion, a community that challenges the injustice of the status quo so that the balance of gracious sustainability, so undermined by the powerful, might be reclaimed. Salvation is the means of living into our true humanity. That makes salvation political. How we live together. That is to say, that salvation has everything to do with the well-being and dignity of our common life. That makes us activists, advocates, protesters, and sometimes revolutionaries, because our common life is always evolving; always challenged by power and self-interest. Empire, in short.

Perhaps more than the other Gospel scribes, Matthew paints a dark picture of life under the oppressive hand of empire. He begins his Gospel with the Holy Family fleeing for their lives from the murderous designs of Herod, Rome's client king set up to rule Judea and parts north including Galilee. He tells us of the Magi from the east who, after paying homage to the infant Jesus, sneak out of the region lest they be detained or worse under Herod's obsessive paranoia. Later Matthew will tell a gory account of the decapitation of John the Baptist at a lavish dinner party in Herod's palace. His execution, as Matthew describes it, contingent on a mere drunken promise. Still later, Jesus will refer

to the emperor of Rome as Satan, that the devil himself, in the flesh, is none other than imperial Rome.

That's the setting, the context, in which our Gospel reading for today is written. Jesus is in the occupied territory of Galilee, and he invites his soon to be disciples into a salvation community. That is to say, he invites them into a community that tells the truth; that relies on each other's resources; a community that finds a way to live with dignity in spite of a broken system; a community to engender shalom, the peace of God in their midst. Living the truth, in all its mystery, can do that. It can establish joy in the midst of suffering; hope in the midst of despair; light in the face of darkness. Such is the alchemy of a community that serves the truth. The alchemy of God's grace. Matthew refers to the healing that occurs in such a community. Thus, Healing is collaborative, contingent on our presence to each other. The witness of Jesus is the witness of a community, a community that has found abundant life amid an abusive hierarchical system. These rustic fishermen have discovered an abundant life far removed from their daily grind of meagre wage earning and paying exorbitant taxes. It is purposeful community that saves. The light to which Matthew refers is the light of enlightened community. We, sisters and brothers are evangelists for community. Ours is to invite the outcast and the broken; the homeless and the poor in Spirit... to simply come and see... to come and feel the power of solidarity for the good and the true. The whole of community is ever so stronger than the sum of its parts. When Jesus proclaims that wherever there are two or three gathered in his name, God is in their midst... He is proclaiming the transformational reality of community.

Yesterday morning your vestry gathered for a retreat to have a conversation about who and where we are as a church, our particular community of faith here on the corner of Government and Ann Streets. We talked about the richness of our lives together in this community of All Saints. We are not perfect; we don't always agree, but it is abundantly evident that the truth to which we bear witness in this place, gives meaning and purpose and a sense of peace to us and among those we serve. One vestry member commented to me that he thought now, more than ever, is the time to be the church; that given the present catastrophe in our land, the church's witness is all the more vital. Jesus reminds his disciples of the ancient vision of our common life... quoting Isaiah, he says the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light... this is no supernatural proclamation... Jesus is referring to the light of the community of faith; the light of a people gathered in God's name; the light of the truth that we bear. Good people, the world, broken and abused depends upon this light... and we, don't doubt, along with the many others gathered in good faith, are that very light... a light that shines in the darkness.

I marvel at the thousands gathered in Minneapolis protesting the capricious cruelty waged by our own government. Some things never change, in spite of the lessons taught by history. But the people will prevail because God is in their midst. The light will overcome the darkness. They will prevail; we will prevail; And to repeat myself.... Love, the light of the world, will prevail.