

And I Always Will -- Epiphany 4C

From Christina Rossetti's poem, *At Last*: "Many have sung of love as a root of bane; while to my mind a root of balm it is. For love at length breeds love; sufficient bliss for life and death and rising up again."

In this season of Epiphany, as we tell the story of a bright star, we must also remember that God has indeed fulfilled the promise to Abraham, whose children should be numbered as the stars in the heavens. And in time, and in time, as the song goes, we will all become stars. So how will we shine? We celebrate the diversity of our shinings, even as they challenge us. Most of us want to belong to a specific group, with a specific identity; but we hear God calling us to reach outside ourselves and embrace outsiders in charity as if they were our own. The specific group God proposes is Creation. The old saw goes, "Man proposes; God disposes," but the reverse is also true. God has set the forces of Creation in motion, but we must steer and power ourselves toward the Good. We must get up and get going with the work of loving embrace.

The prophet Jeremiah hears a call that is undeniable and irresistible. He tries to object, "But I'm just a child!" I can't possibly make plans and take actions so broad and bold. My place is here at home, safe with my family. God's answer: "Fear not. Get up and get going with the work of prophetic ministry."

Each of our readings today tells us in no uncertain terms that we have to grow up, move out of the house and

take on the uncomfortable, risky challenges of our calling. We have to shine out in the world so that our light can be seen beyond the narrow confines of our snug burrows.

The proverb says, “The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.” When we are children, our concept of God begins with our families – especially our parents. We could glance in their faces and immediately tell if things were going well, or if there was trouble ahead. If we wanted things to go well, we had to do whatever it took to bring smiles, if possible to those all-important faces. If the faces of my grownups were angry or disapproving, I was afraid. If they were smiling and encouraging, I was happy. Simple correlation. If we were lucky, we did not live in fear of them, we lived in fear of their disapproval, and learned to avoid it. The same goes for our proverbial fear of God: it is wise to avoid sin.

Avoiding sin as a grownup takes some skill. We have to learn to live with paradoxes and disappointments of all flavors. We have to learn to share our joys as well as our fears. We have to learn to let go of all that is not God. Jesus tells us to keep a childlike faith in the goodness of God and the power of neighbor love to justify and thereby save us, but that does not mean we’re supposed to be childish. We make the transition from our parents’ faces as the touchstone of fear and faith, to the face of God, going before us into the world. Out here, the choices of faith over fear will always be before us, subtle, complicated and often misleading. Yes, the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, but not its end. Wisdom’s end is love, or as we learned in Sunday school, charity:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as a sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, and have all faith, so as to remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I thought as a child I understood as a child. But when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

The end, the end-all and be-all, without which nothing, not just matters, but is, is love. As much as we employ this passage to celebrate milestones with those closest to us, it is also very much about the kind of risky love for those who are different, who are 'other;' love that can feel oh so uncomfortable. That's what makes Jesus' hometown crowd so angry. He insists that God's first priority is for us to go out and love strangers.

We stars cannot possibly shine unless we burn with an inner fire. Our worship life must be vibrant – we must be a family who nurture faith in one another. We cannot possibly shine out unless we are good at stoking each other's inner fires – our mutual support must be attentive and grateful. And our corporate life must be energetic, creative, responsible and generous; we must be a family

that takes care of itself. Thus we gathered last week next door for our annual checkup. Nurturing faith, nourishing and celebrating life and taking care of business: that is a good description of a thriving family. We see God in the faces of one another. But each of our stars was made for a purpose even greater.

When my kids' dear mother and I accepted within ourselves and, with some very careful and wise help, admitted to each other that we were unable to maintain the marriage commitments we had made, our son Jim was only six. Once the conclusion was reached and the decision made to part, his mom and I spent a good deal more time together in prayer and with our counselor, discovering ways to part charitably and maintain our unquestionable commitment to bring our children up peacefully. We asked and God helped us to set aside self righteousness and make a new commitment: the promise to each make it our business to see that the kids had the best possible relationships with the other parent. I won't say we immediately entered a flow state of happy concord, but our prayers were answered, and after 18 or so years, this formula still seems to be working. It has only gotten easier.

At the time, I was used to putting Jim to bed each night, reading a story, and telling him I loved him. In my increasing fear of what life would be like after our separation, when I was to move two miles across town to my own garret, to "I love you" I began adding "and I always will." Well my six-year-old let me get away with this... once. The second time I said it, he rolled over, looked me in

the face and said, “Dad, even before God made me, I knew that we would always love each other.”

That shut me up, I tell you what. That was about the last time I tried any theological/eschatological theorizing out on him. It was a simple, childlike thing to say, but childish? No. He got it, the third part of the Trinity: the Holy Ghost Power, the means by which God puts our stars to shining, the basic ingredient that will fulfill us. That something is the spiritual action of love. It is the action God took in coming to live with and love the very other: us, and what God would have us imitate as missionaries in the world.

Like Jeremiah, we’d rather stay protected and simple. Like St. Paul, we want to boast of our singular faith and hope, because they are real. Like the Nazareans, we want to see some local miracles, pronto. But God is whispering in each of our ears: ‘A word to the wise: Take action. Go out, find the neighbors you don’t know yet, next door and across the globe and love them, especially the ones who make you uncomfortable. Disregard the consequences for yourself. Charity is the only thing that never dies. And by the way, fear not. You will never be alone. I will be with you, even unto the end of the ages of ages.’

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