

WGUMC January 15, 2017 MLK, Jr. Day
"The Prophet of Light" Isaiah 49:1-7

We had so much fun with the baptism last week that I forget to mention that we are now in the season of Epiphany. The word means "manifestation," so it's the season that we celebrate the manifestation or revelation of Christ as a light to the nations. Many of the readings for the season come from the Book of Isaiah. For the Feast of Epiphany, we have: "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." [Isaiah 60:1,3] And today we have this: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." [49:6]

You could call Isaiah the Prophet of Light, not to be confused with Thomas Kincaide, who was called the Painter of Light. Kincaide's fuzzy, schmaltzy, light-tinged scenes manufacture false memories in us. They make us look back longingly, listlessly, to a past that never was. By contrast,

Isaiah's clean-edged, light-filled words encourage us to look forward to a bright future that, by God's grace, not only can be but will be. The Prophet of Light is a painter of coming reality.

But what does that future look like for you and me? Not what it looked like to Isaiah's Jewish contemporaries, I guarantee. For the first hearers of this prophecy, Isaiah's words pointed to a coming king, one who would deliver the nation of Israel from the evils of empire, the injustices of foreign domination, and the hopelessness of going after other gods. Now it is too true that we are still battling all those same evils today. But we who hear Isaiah's message today are no longer looking for a king (or a leader who acts like one). We are looking for a Christ. For Christians, Christ is the one who was called before he was born. Christ is the servant in whom all nations will be glorified. And Christ is the one who will bring salvation to the very ends of the earth.

This week a new president will be inaugurated. It's a good time to be reminded of the qualitative difference between divine and human leadership. Look at Jesus: the working class son of a carpenter in Nazareth. More than any other leader the world has ever known, he was OF the people and FOR the people because he gave his life to redeem the people.

That makes him a true populist. If you don't believe me, just look at his cabinet! Not a Harvard-educated lawyer or billionaire businessman among them. His disciples, his closest advisors, were ordinary folk. They were no accounts. They had nothing, but they turned out to be something. With the power of the Holy Spirit, they became the founding fathers of the Church who, along with some founding mothers, would take Jesus' gospel of salvation to the edges of Israel and beyond.

Our reading begins with a call to those edges: "Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!" Now, living as we do a stone's throw from the coast, that call

caught my attention and made we wonder if Isaiah isn't calling to us. At first it seems strange that Isaiah should address the coastlands, for foreigners were living there. But that is actually why he was reaching out to them, because he wanted to say to them: the light of salvation is not just for the Jews, but for you, too!

Today, we have many foreign-born people living on our coasts. And those of us who have been here a long time take for granted the racial and cultural diversity of the Bay Area. But there are many other people who don't live in the coastlands. They live somewhere in the middle of the country, in places like Iowa where I was born and Montana where I grew up. And I can tell you that many of them think that those who live on the coasts are living on the edge of the world or in another world altogether. For them, the coastlands are the cultural, political and spiritual margins of our nation and don't really represent the heart and soul of the country. So Isaiah's

words come all the way to the West Coast to remind us that even though we are living on the edge, in more ways than one, we can't be written off, for the good news is for us, too.

In fact, living in the coastlands of this great country gives us a unique perspective on the gospel. Living on the margins of the continent, we can appreciate a gospel that was intended for people living on the margins. When Jesus started his ministry, he got up in the synagogue in Nazareth and read these words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

That proclamation of his mission to the margins is found in Luke 4:18-19. Some would say that we can't really relate to the marginal ministry of Jesus living in the heart of Silicon Valley. After all, life can be pretty nice here. We have good

jobs, good schools, good hospitals, and good restaurants. We have lots of cultural and recreational opportunities. Lots of beautiful open space. If you've got a place to live, life is good.

But the storm last week reminded me of how precarious this all is. As I watched the flood waters churning down the San Lorenzo River in Felton on Monday, I couldn't help but think about all the people whose houses (or tents) were flooded because they were living too close to the margins of a creek or river or bay.

It's the same feeling I get when I stand on the beach and contemplate how much we all live at the mercy of the ocean. So you see, we coast-dwellers have all these reminders that we humans—all of us, no matter where or how we live—are living on the border, the border between safety and uncertainty, between comfort and catastrophe, between life and death.

Isaiah, the Prophet of Light, calls to us who are living in the coastlands to assure us that it is precisely on the borders

and margins of life where the light will most brightly shine, where Jesus will most certainly show up, where Christ will be most clearly revealed to us. And if that promise seems too long ago and too far away, then we have a modern-day Prophet of Light to make it more real for us.

Martin Luther King, Jr. brought the light of the nations to a nation that had too long sat in the darkness of fear and prejudice and racism. He took the gospel to the margins, and we saw Jesus when Martin sat at the front of the bus in Montgomery. We saw Jesus when Martin was stabbed at Blumstein's Department Store in Harlem. We saw Jesus when Martin wrote letters from a jail cell in Birmingham. We saw Jesus when Martin shared his dream at the March on Washington.

Last Saturday, I went to the funeral of Rev. Dwight Kintner, father of Russ Kintner. Dwight was a United Methodist missionary, pastor, social activist and peace advocate. He was

at that march. He heard that speech. He carried that dream.

We all need to.

It is especially important now to carry the light and hope of Martin's Jesus to the margins. The people who live there are frightened. They don't feel safe, and they need Jesus to help them keep the faith. So this weekend Martin gives us our marching orders: Take Christ and go to the margins of our economy and pitch a tent there with the poor and homeless. Go to the margins of our politics and stand with people of color and people of other faiths and people from other countries and people with other abilities and speak for those who are voiceless. Go to the margins of our legal system and sit in courtrooms, juvenile halls and prisons. Go to the margins of our health care system and do the rounds in emergency rooms, drug rehab and skilled nursing centers. Go to the margins of your own families with a word of forgiveness, a gesture of grace and bring those lost lambs home.

But before you do any of those things, don't forget to go into the farthest and darkest reaches of your own heart and let Christ's light shine there first. For Martin would have you know that Jesus is not just a light to the nations, but to you, too, whichever coast you live on, whichever edge you are perched on, whichever border you are up against, whichever margin you have been pushed to. Even if you have been hounded to the very ends of the earth, the Prophets of Light have promised us that God's salvation will reach you. Jesus, the coastlands are waiting. Come!