



## Integrating the Intelligence We Already Have

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin*

*The Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord ~ January 10, 2010*

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the LORD,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.  
For I am the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.  
I give Egypt as your ransom,  
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.  
Because you are precious in my sight,  
and honoured, and I love you,  
I give people in return for you,  
nations in exchange for your life.  
Do not fear, for I am with you;  
I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west I will gather you;  
I will say to the north, 'Give them up,'  
and to the south, 'Do not withhold;  
bring my sons from far away  
and my daughters from the end of the earth—  
everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made.'

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Apparently there were numerous red flags which should have tipped us off. Said President Obama, “The U.S. government had sufficient information to have uncovered this plot and potentially disrupt the Christmas Day attack, but our intelligence community failed to connect those dots.” We “had reports that al-Qaeda was working with him and that the group was planning attacks on American targets;” we had even received a warning from the attacker’s father. Apparently there were ample indicators, but we failed to see them. Said the president, “This was not a failure to collect intelligence; it was a failure to integrate and understand the intelligence that we already had.” (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*)

The president made that statement on the Feast of the Epiphany, on Wednesday, the day on which we pray, “O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face.” (BCP.214) This season of Epiphany is the time in which we may be attentive to “seeing;” to consider the ways in which God is made manifest in our lives, to seek to realize the presence of Christ in another whom we meet, and finally to consider how we make Christ manifest to others through our own lives. This is the very essence of our life as followers of Christ, and we state it as the core purpose of our ministry here at St. Peter’s: “to know the transforming power of God’s love and to make God’s love known to others” – that’s our stated core purpose. To know that love, to see, recognize, and name it – and to make it known to others. So often of course, the clues and signs of God’s love are all about us, yet we do not see, can not see. Said the president, “This was not a failure to collect intelligence;” we have the data! This “was a failure to integrate and understand the intelligence that we already had.”

There are times when we feel that we’re only sort of being faithful. We get to church; at least, we did today. We say our prayers; at least, whisper them in moments of fear or rejoicing. We consider our actions in light of the Gospel. Bits and pieces of a life of faith; it can be challenging to integrate them.

Surely, the Christmas terrorist worked hard to keep his plot hidden from view; I presume he did not wish to be seen. Just as surely, the God of Christmas is doing all things possible to make her intention known, to make her love for us manifest, to be seen – by sheep and shepherds, magi and kings, the little children, even those who are blind, even us.

The President and the TSA – the Transportation Security Administration – are taking steps so that in the future they will be better able to integrate and understand the intelligence they already have. How might we take such steps in faith to integrate the intelligence we already have? I think that’s a very good question for the Epiphany season.

At least two possibilities are given to us, gifts from God. God gives us the Word, the witness of our Holy Scripture and its record of God’s relationship with the faithful – and the not-so-faithful – of prior generations. The opportunity for us is to weave that Word of God into the fabric of our daily lives.

I remember a book called *Composing A Life*, by Mary Catherine Bateson, a cultural anthropologist, who suggested that while we may imagine our lives as having some sort of purposeful trajectory, we often see, especially in hindsight, a life that more closely resembles a patchwork quilt – with relationships, experiences, achievements, joys, losses, all coming together in a colorful, higgledy-piggledy fashion. With a little distance, we might see patterns emerge among the patches. I suggest that we might imagine weaving a life with different strands of color and texture; with our passions and abilities, perspectives and beliefs, as the warp and the weft woven in one; some of the threads tough, some delicate, bright or dark or subtle; some hidden for years at a time emerging later. How might the Word of God – a strand of gold, perhaps – be woven into the fabric of our daily living?

Let’s take an example. Consider this morning’s word from the prophet Isaiah. The prophet addresses the people of Israel who are in exile, captives in a foreign land, in Babylon. They are without hope, despairing, for there is no help in sight. To the people, Yahweh, the God of Israel, “articulates as forcefully and compellingly as anywhere in the Bible, God’s defining and uncompromising love for Israel.” (Brueggemann) “But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” And the text continues with the promise to gather the people together from their respective exile, from the north and south, daughters and sons gathered from the ends of the earth.

This Word is spoken to a people without hope. Is it spoken to you and me? Sometimes. It is for us when we are lost, when we despair. Surely it is spoken this day for the 15.3 million people in this nation without jobs, for the vast majority of the currently unemployed who are young African-American or Latino males without college education – you must have seen the statistics. In this text, God is very specific about those on whom favor is given, even to the point of offering up others in exchange to bring this particular people home. It is often the case

that a passage of Scripture is given for one person on one day and another person on another day. Perhaps this Word of God's persistent love is for you today.

But the point is this: this Word has been spoken in our hearing. This Word, this moment in time, is now one of the threads in the fabric which is your life – a gold thread running through. You are here; you have heard it; you have been given the intelligence. We do not necessarily have to do anything with it, in response to it – right now. You may not have to believe it, or trust in it; it may be enough that we have simply experienced it, heard the Word: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."

Don't try to force something out of it. I don't know about you, but I too often get hung up hearing scripture as some sort of ethical "ought" – as if whenever God speaks, I'm obligated to do something. Maybe all I'm supposed to do is smile, and say "thank you." Instead of feeling obligated, when we hear the Word, receive it, observe it, integrate it; in a flash, it is already within you, woven into your life – and we're on to the next moment. When looking at a large and intricate piece of fabric, you can barely even see a single thread. Yet if there are enough threads of similar color woven all through it, then you can see them. If the golden Word of God is woven through the fabric of our life, it changes everything.

The Word is one of God's gifts. Another one of God's gifts is Sacrament, in which we recognize that the visible and the ordinary is blessed and made sacred. Bread and wine are become body and blood. Eating the bread and drinking the cup, we become the body and blood of Christ. Our *Book of Common Prayer* (p.857) defines "sacraments as outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace."

Today is the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord Jesus. We heard in the Gospel of Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan. This morning at St. Peter's we baptize Oliver and Jack. The water of baptism and the oil of anointing are the outward and visible signs of the inward and spiritual grace that is given. In them, we are given a moment in which we might recognize the sanctity and holiness of life. Oliver and Jack are ... what? Just two little boys – likely filled with snips and snails, and puppy dog's tails, as the old nursery rhyme suggests. Just like all the rest of us boys. In case you're not familiar with it, the rhyme says that little girls are made of sugar and spice and all things nice.

But upon Oliver and Jack this day, the heavens shall open, and the Holy Spirit shall come upon them, and the Word of God shall be spoken to them – to Jack and Oliver, and God shall say: "you are my beloved; with you I am very, very well pleased." And all the rest of us would be well advised to take off our shoes and to bow down for I tell you the Lord God is in this place.

What sort of sign are you waiting for? Maybe we think that if life were really holy, it would all be dazzlingly bright, or we'd be overwhelmed with a sense of well-being, just grinning from ear to ear. Well go ahead and grin! As Thomas Merton once put it – as much to himself as to anyone else – "Just dance in the sun you tepid idiot!" I was brought up short this past week, during our silent meditation, by Jesus' assurance, "Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it." (Matthew 13:17)

Connect the dots. There is ample evidence, abundant intelligence, threads of gold running right through. So let no one fail to integrate or to understand the intelligence we already have.