

Homily for January 3, 2009 (Epiphany of Lord, B)
Is 60:1-6; Ps 72; Eph 3:2-3a, 5-6; Mt. 2:1-12

A old woman was walking through the forest one bright but cold January morning. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed something sparkling in the sunlight a few feet off the path. Stepping into the deeper snow, she found a beautiful rock unlike any she had seen. Its deep color and glint of light invited her to pick it up. She bent down, gently pried it from the packed snow, put it in her bag, and continued her journey.

She soon met another traveler heading the other way. He was poorly clothed and looked cold and hungry. He asked if she had any food, and as she opened her bag to share some he also saw the beautiful stone. Gazing at it, he knew that if he could have that stone he would never again have to worry about being hungry. "May I have that stone?" he implored. Without hesitation and with a smile and few words, the woman gave him the stone as well as some bread.

When he returned to his home, the man hid the stone in a box under his bed. For the next day, he went back and forth to check on it, admiring its beauty and dreaming about how much money he would get for it. But then he started to have trouble sleeping and his delight in the stone started to fade. A few days later, troubled in spirit and exhausted by his lack of sleep, he decided set off to find the old woman and return the stone.

It took several more days as he went from town to town, inquiring if anyone knew an elderly woman of a certain description. Finally, at about Noon one day, he found himself in the marketplace of a village; and there, selling some bread and cakes at a stand, was the old woman. He rushed to her and, bowing before her, he pulled the shimmering stone from his bag.

Handing it back to her he said, "My lady, this stone is surely valuable and would take care of me for a long, long time. But I want to give it back to you and ask you for something even more valuable."

"What is that, my son?" the old woman asked.

The man paused for a moment and then requested, "Will you give me whatever is within you that enabled you to so easily surrender such a treasure?"

In this season when we celebrate the great gift that God gave us in Jesus, we might ask the same favor: to have some measure of the love that enabled the Father to so freely surrender his Son to our world and for our sake. When we ask, however, will also need to be mindful that God's love has consequences and some of them are disturbing. That's what today's Scripture readings remind us:

- ❖ *God's love disturbs our notions of power.*
- ❖ *God's love disturbs our notions of who is "in" and who is "out."*
- ❖ *God's love disturbs history.*

God's love disturbs our notions of power. In our first reading, the author scripture scholars call "Trito-Isaiah" (because he wrote the third part, chapters 56-66, of what is now collectively known as the Book of Isaiah) wrote to a community returning to Jerusalem from several generations in exile. Imagine what it would be like for a person who left Detroit, Gary, or East St. Louis in 1950 and was returning to those cities today. That's what it was like for the people who came back to Jerusalem after 70 years in Babylon. The glorious city of their ancestors was no more. The Temple, where God was said to dwell with his people, was demolished. Where could they look to find hope?

Not in other gods. Not in alliances with other nations or empires. Not in the force of arms. Those things, their prophets warned, had brought this very disaster about! They were instead exhorted to put their hope in God, the light who would one day draw people of all nations to Jerusalem. The power they needed, the power that would sustain them, was *spiritual*, not material.

Further, that power would no longer be limited to the people of Israel. It would be freely offered to people of all nations. Indeed, *the power of God's love would disturb their notions of who is "in" and who is "out."* From Isaiah's vision of people coming from Midian, Ephah and Sheba with their gifts, to Matthew's story of the magi coming from the east and following a star to worship "the newborn king of the Jews," to St. Paul's realization that "the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel," God forever removed the presumption that some are loved and saved while others are not. What mattered was—and is—our response to God's grace.

Though raised a strict Jew and a Pharisee, St. Paul could not stand in the way when God's grace was extended to those whom he had formerly believed were "unclean" and outside the scope of God's care and concern. Though he was an apostle, he did not see himself as an owner of God's grace but rather as its "steward." As Catholics and especially in our relations with people of other faiths, do we see ourselves as owners of God's grace or do we recognize that we are stewards called to serve as *God* desires, not the other way around?

God's love disturbs history. It "greatly troubled" Herod "and all Jerusalem with him." As noted religious scholar Karen Armstrong recently wrote in a Christmas Day guest editorial in the *Los Angeles Times*:

The Gospels paint a picture that is very different from the cozy stable scene on the Christmas cards. They speak of deprivation and displacement. The Messiah himself is an outsider. There is no room in the inn....As victims of Herod's tyranny, the Holy Family become refugees; other innocents are slaughtered. If we attend carefully to these parts of the story, the specter of contemporary suffering—within our own society and worldwide—will haunt our festivities. And we are left with the disturbing suggestion that the future, for good or ill, may lie with those who are currently excluded.

Have a happy—and disturbing—New Year. +