

Trinity Church
January 27, 2008

3 Epiphany
RCL, Year A, Epiphany 3

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*O Lord, you are my light and my salvation,
You, Lord, are the strength of my life,
Of whom, then, shall I be afraid?
Even now you lift up my head. Amen.*

Right at the outset of his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul says two astonishing things that I want to use to frame what I have to say today. Paul writes, "The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing; but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God." This distinction that Paul makes between the foolishness that he feels when nonbelievers malign his faith in Jesus Christ, a foolishness that he thinks reflects back on them, who are perishing, and the power of God that he feels when he is with the faithful, those who rejoice in Christ as their Lord, the One who is saving them from foolishness. This distinction that Paul makes is one that every Christian has felt. A cold darkness comes over me when I am with those who have rejected Christ as foolishness and who tell me that I am a fool, or worse, even to be a Christian. I would like to reach out in that clammy gloom and find the light string and turn on the light so that foolish darkness can be dispelled. But, alas, as hard as I try, in the end I know that only Christ can illumine that dark foolishness in any soul. Christ is the light, the power of God.

But, when I am with you, here, in worship, the feeling of the power of God among us never fails me. As Isaiah says it, "We have walked out of darkness into a great light." That warm and piercing light has shone on us. It explodes within us as amazing joy and liberation, as if every yoke of our burden is broken, every oppression lifted.

But how did we get from that foolish darkness of those who are perishing into this marvelous light of Christ? The Gospel says that it is an unimaginable miracle. We are here because Christ beckoned to us and led us here, by what means we know not. When Jesus left Nazareth and came down to the Sea of Galilee, he turned on the light of the Gospel and proclaimed, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near," and when he saw Peter and Andrew, he beckoned them into the light, and for an unknown reason, or in an unexplained way, they walked into the light. "I want to be a child of the light ... I want to follow Jesus." And the same thing happened to James and John, and to you and me. We really don't know how we got here, but this we know: it was by the hand of Christ, the power of God, the good news of God, the kingdom of God, the healing of God. Today we celebrate and we remember the miracle of our being drawn out of darkness into light, when we were saved from foolishness, and we give thanks.

The other thing that Paul writes in First Corinthians is this: "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you." Paul had obviously never met up with us Episcopalians. Once we rejoiced in our unity as a Communion; now we seem to eat and drink discord and division as if it were our favorite meal.

But this is what I think Paul is writing about, and what I think Andrew and Peter and James and John were about when they left their nets and followed Jesus. When you walk into the light, you walk into an emptiness, into an openness that yearns to be filled with the love of God in Christ. The popular retreat leader, Joyce Rupp, uses an empty cup to make this point. "Hold an empty

cup in your hand. Look at all the room the cup has for filling. Picture then the inner part of yourself. Notice not its dark emptiness, but rejoice in how vast is the space that needs filling. Hold out your cup like a beggar before you and ask God to fill you." Opening up ourselves to God's grace every day makes room for so much that we can hold every diversity in the unity of the cup that Christ fills in us.

Of course, there is that well-known Zen story that makes a similar point. The teacher asks his student to hold out his tea cup, and proceeds to fill it from the teapot he has taken off the fire. But when the cup is full, the teacher continues to pour the tea into the overflowing cup. The student is not sure what to do. Frustrated, he says, "The cup is overfull. No more will go in!" The teacher then says, "Like the cup, you are full of your own opinions and prejudices and expectations and preoccupations and assumptions. How can you be taught if you do not empty your cup? It is in emptiness that you will be filled."

This is exactly what Paul is speaking of. This is exactly how Peter and Andrew and James and John were able to leave their preoccupations and follow Christ. They were able to empty themselves, and invite Jesus to fill their lives. Paul asks the Corinthians to empty themselves of their quarrels and divisions so that they can be filled with Christ's light. We are being called to do the same.

Today we rejoice in this miracle of emptiness to self and openness to God that draws us into Christ. Into the light. Yes, for us, who sat in darkness, on us light has dawned.