

Homily, St. Andrew's
Epiphany (trans), Jan 3, 2016
Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Have you seen the movie of the season? If not, umm... just in case... I must issue a spoiler alert... *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* is, of course, the much marketed and much celebrated movie of the season... was there anything else playing in the theatres these last few weeks?!? Nobody even knows! Now I'm not a big sci-fi fan and I was too young to be a part of the hype when the original *Star Wars* was first released. But I am old enough that I was raised on the original trilogy. There was a time when I knew much of the original, Episode 4, by heart. It has been years, likely a decade or more, since I've seen any of the movies and I didn't have time for a refresher before heading off to see the much touted *Episode 7 The Force Awakens*, last week.

The new movie is fantastic and I started thinking about this sermon before it was even over (Ahh... the life of a preacher!). What makes the new *Star Wars* so great is that it is a re-make of the original... only it isn't. It turns out, it is both a re-play of the first *Star Wars* AND it is a wholly new creation. The plot is basically the same as the original and many characters from the original series are back, including the original actors. They have aged, of course, with an almost 40-year gap between movie release dates but the producers have integrated their older and wiser characters with a new generation of heroes. The look and feel of the new movie mirrors the original almost completely and includes aspects of all three movies of the first trilogy, most notably in the landscapes of desert, snow-covered wilderness and lush green forest. Where there isn't a direct connection, there are many moments of "homage" to the original series. I think the only major characters missing were the ewoks... and, I suppose, Jabba the Hut!

The Force Awakens is not, however, simply a re-make. The two aspects of difference that stood out to me immediately were gender parity and humour. The new hero is a heroine - Rey, and the homage to Yoda is an odd female savant-type character. This is, I think, a reflection of a broader movement towards gender parity in the past 40 years. The other obvious difference was in how funny the new movie is. You laugh out loud a number of times, mostly because of how it includes, parodies, and reflects the original movie. But because it's so well done... it's so intelligent while at the same time light-hearted... it's not mocking or derisive. Instead, it's brilliant and entertaining and a faithful re-creation that doesn't take itself too seriously. JJ Abrams has managed to create something wholly new that is wholly connected to what we have loved for at least 2 generations. Incredible.

So... what does all this have to do with church and our celebration of Epiphany today?!? In broad strokes, and in a nutshell... *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* represents the vision I have, my dream, for our church. To me, this movie shows that it is possible to create something wholly new that is wholly connected to what we have long loved. The characters we have loved for years are still there, with a few grey hairs and a few extra pounds, perhaps, but they play different roles because there is a new generation who are growing into being the lead characters -

the heroes. The new movie offers an homage to what has gone before, with light-heartedness and humour, while moving the story on in new but familiar ways. Our challenge and opportunity is to do the same... it is a challenge and opportunity that is not wholly unfamiliar in our history. Our readings for our celebration of Epiphany today offer us windows into earlier times when the faithful people of God re-created something wholly new that was wholly connected to what they already loved. Let's start with Isaiah...

Our reading from Isaiah chapter 60 comes from the hinge time after the fall of Babylon to the Persian King Cyrus. The colonial strategy of the Persians was much different from that of the Babylonians. The Persians sent all the exiled peoples home and provided funds for them to rebuild their communities, their places of worship, their lives. It took several decades for the strategy to be fully enacted but it worked well and the Persian Empire lasted for a few centuries. Today's passage is likely from early in the period, as the people Israel are beginning to return to Jerusalem. The coming of the Persians brought light to the dark days of exile and the literature of the day is full of great hope that Yahweh had not forgotten the faithful and was working through the new Persian rulers to restore Judah. Indeed, the Persian victory over Babylon is understood as "God's decisive intervention on behalf of Jerusalem and the faithful core of the people." (Blenkinsopp, 210)

The full impact of Persia on the story of salvation is not addressed in today's passage but the time period is critically important in the story of salvation. Stories of the period are not as well known as stories of earlier times but more than stories, it matters so much because it is when the Old Testament as we know it today was either written or edited together. Moreover, one of the major shifts that occurred following the Persian Restoration, the thing that arguably meant not just the survival but the thriving of Judaism, was a move from Temple sacrifice to sabbath-keeping as the key spiritual practice that created identity and established community boundaries. In a nutshell, something wholly new was created out of the remnants and remains of traditional writings, practices and understandings of God's will and God's relationship with God's people. Something wholly new was created that was wholly connected to what was already known and loved.

Today we hear the beginning, the revelation that something major is happening: "Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses arms." They don't yet know what it will all mean - what struggles and victories; what transformation - will come, and yet there is a kind of fulfillment in just the gathering. They know that God had intervened mightily, hope had dawned, the force had awakened.

Our New Testament passages today likewise speak to the dawning of an unprecedented change in the story of salvation. It's hard to say whether the letter to the Ephesians or Matthew's Gospel were written first but certainly in story-time, the Gospel comes first. There is much we could say about Matthew's account of the coming of magi from the east to pay homage to the baby King of the Jews. The intrigue, the danger, the strangeness and beauty of the story is compelling but at its root, the story points to a profound change coming upon the Jewish world. Strangers from the east, non-Jews, using strange means, are the first to recognize the importance of this baby. Their presence and questions cause great upheaval as fear spreads through Jerusalem. What could it all mean? Nothing but trouble, especially if you already are the King of

the Jews, as King Herod was. He and others were right to be afraid as Jesus' presence in the world did indeed change their community forever.

The passage we hear from the letter to the Ephesians makes the change in the community, that the Gospel story points to, explicit: "... the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." The inclusion of Gentiles into the promises of the God of Israel was unprecedented and much of the New Testament reflects or directly addresses the conflict that including Gentiles caused. Prior to this, a few Gentiles converted, sure... by attending Synagogue, practicing Sabbath and getting circumcised but the lines of identity and of community boundaries remained clear and strong. God's incarnation into the world in Jesus changed everything. It shifted the boundaries and indeed, eventually created something wholly new - a wholly new religion, though one wholly connected to what was already known and loved.

Paul writes of his calling, the grace, to "bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things..." He harkens back to the story of creation, bringing the fullness of what has gone before into the present experience of God through Christ in the community of the church. What the magi from the east first knew is now, through Paul, being proclaimed throughout the whole world. Something new and unexpected had occurred and while even the faithful Jew Paul could not know what it would all mean - what legacy he was leaving in his words, how the communities he established would grow and spread - there was a fulfillment in the work of the earliest apostles. The working of God, the power of God, became present to a whole new community of faithful people. God had intervened mightily, hope had dawned, the force had awakened.

Likewise, we can't know the fullness of what God's revelation of God's own self in our celebration of Epiphany today might mean for our coming year. What we do know is that when God intervenes mightily, something wholly new is created that is wholly connected to what is already known and loved. And so as we watch for how God incarnates into our community and into each of our lives this year, in 2016, may our hope be fulfilled. May the force be with us.