

# **Good News for All**

## **January 25, 2009 – 3 Epiphany**

### **Rev. Paul Johns**

Johan 3:1-5, 10  
Mark 1:14-20

Let me begin by holding up the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* for this past Wednesday. This, of course, is a picture of President Obama at the Inaugural. Right on this front page, which has few words, there are two main themes. First of all, these are difficult times with war on two fronts and an imperiled economic system. The second major theme, however, is that, through resolute patience, determined labor, and painful sacrifices, we can pick ourselves up.

A woman who was a commentator for ABC said this could have been the most serious inaugural speech ever given. There were only five interruptions for applause. There was almost no humor.

I was reminded of an African-American pastor where I served in Lockport. Bill Walton said, “I know how to get response from people. You don’t preach about the dirty streets of Lockport/Fairmont, but you preach about the golden streets of the heavenly Jerusalem. And then it comes – Hallelujah, Amen, Yes, Yes. But you need both a focus on Lockport and on Jerusalem.”

This morning I would like to start with the Good News. January is the first month of the season of Epiphany. This season begins with the coming of the Wise Men. They probably came from Persia. They came in the tradition of Darius of Persia who, hundreds of years before this, promoted the worship of God through the Hebrew priest, Ezra. The coming of the Wise Men is a sign that the Good News is for all people.

A key theme in both the Old Testament and the New Testament is well stated by the prophet Isaiah. “I will give you Israel as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

My sister called a couple of days ago. The three sisters are so excited that they have found letters and other material from my uncle who was a pioneer missionary in Africa. He was also an artist and drew pictures of the African villages. He was also a musician and would make instruments, for example, out of animal horns and sing the Gospel into the hearts of the people, especially through the children. We need to get my uncle to record some of his experiences, but, at age 90, he was still too busy for the church, calling on the old people.

First of all the Good News is for all people. Yes, it began at the House of Israel. It had to begin someplace. But hundreds of years before Jesus Isaiah writes, “The Good News is too big for the House of Israel. It is for all.”

The question now, however, is, “How is that Good News going to get to all?” President Obama talked about a struggle like at the Battle of Gettysburg. Jesus said, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” Jesus did not say, “If some day you feel motivated to be my ambassador, my missionary, I think it would be nice if you would do that. No, he said, “Go.” I am not going to reach people by lightening bolts out of heaven. As Jesus reached down to heal the ear of the high priest servant that Peter had sliced off, Jesus said, “put your sword away. That is not my style. My word goes forth in love and free will choice.”

We go to our Old Testament reading for the day from the book of Jonah. God said, “Jonah, I want you to go to that great city of Ninevah.” The ruins of Ninevah are right across the river in Iraq from modern Mosul. A short time ago the *Chicago Tribune* ran an article about Christians trying to minister in Mosul.

Jonah got the message and he left quickly. The only problem is that he headed in the opposite direction to Tarshish. After spending a little time in the belly of a whale, he finally went to Ninevah. But here is a part of the story that we seldom tell. Jonah told the people to repent, but he did not think they would. We know from history and archaeology that the Assyrians of Ninevah were a cruel people. Our Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago campus shows this cruelty. Jonah wanted the worst for them. And so he pouted.

The Lord came and said, “Jonah, quit acting like a spoiled child. Let’s go to work as missionaries, as witnesses. I will be with you always. The Word of God, then and now, is, “Go, and I will always be with you.” Amen.