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AN EPIPHANY OF A NEW ERA?

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isa 9:2).

As 2009 begins, the painful economic recession is deepening and spreading throughout the world. Trust in financial, business and political leaders has plummeted, and the future feels hopeless and foreboding, as more and more lose their jobs. Entrenched conflicts continue to rage and ravage millions. In the midst of this, some of the greed-driven powers of empire that have been dominating our world have been exposed.¹

Yet, amid this prevailing darkness, the Epiphany story is heard again: of a star shining over Bethlehem, pointing to the One deemed to be the Light of the world (Mt 2:1-12). Indeed, the heart of Epiphany is the revealing of Jesus as the Christ, the bearer of peace, justice and salvation to the despairing world of his day, and also to ours today. But how might this light of Epiphany be breaking into and transforming our world today?

This year the world’s attention has been drawn less to the Christian festival of Epiphany at the beginning of January than to Barak Obama’s inauguration on January 20. Might the two have something to do with each other?

Seldom has so much of the world’s attention been focused on and infused with such hope in the midst of such foreboding darkness, as it has been by one political figure. The hopes and dreams of not only US citizens but also of much of the rest of the world have been placed on him—in ways that seem to transcend race, nationality, religion, culture and political divisions. For many there is the pulsating sense of this being a “new day.” Remarkably, January 20 became a transcendent moment for the world, when the hopes for a different world have been lit, at least for a brief glimmer. Rarely have people throughout the world been so brought together across all that divides them as in this extraordinary event.

Many have attached deeply religious meanings and connotations to this event, especially those who long have interpreted their struggles for justice and equality in light of the biblical witness. As sung in the well-known African American hymn:

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered; we have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered, out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.²

Indeed, like in biblical times, God is acting through historical events in our day, but naming and discerning when and how this occurs can be risky. Many of us have grown skeptical and critical of political leaders and movements who all too readily align themselves with biblical figures and stories—especially when such leaders claim to be acting on God’s behalf or as God’s chosen people or nation. Be suspicious of those who make such claims! This kind of sacred legitimating of political power can become particularly dangerous when it results in bolstering up oppressive policies and practices of empire and keeping people silent in the face of injustice and violence.

But something else may be going on here. Might God be active in these stirrings of something new, initiating the beginning of a shift away from the ways of empire and its interlocking dominating power over others? Might we be moving toward a new sense of human community that involves crossing some of the usual divides, shifting perspectives and relationships, forging new priorities and policies, and seeking greater justice for the most vulnerable?

Many lofty associations and richly symbolic meanings have been attached to Barack Obama’s election. He simply does not fit the usual expectations of who Americans elect to be their president. He embodies the diversity not only of the USA but of the world: his family members have roots in Africa, Europe and Asia; they are Christians, Muslims and Jews. The world’s hopes—for a different kind of world—have coalesced around a highly gifted yet fallible human being, and indeed he has inspired a new kind of hope in billions of people around the world. He is a different kind of world leader than the world has been accustomed to expect from the US or any other country—in both his motley lineage and the nuanced complexity of his thinking.

Yet because of how desperately our world is yearning for hope, there is the danger of placing too many hopes and expectations on him. Thus, it is crucial to insist that he is not a messiah or savior. Obama has been consistently clear and sober in reminding us to expect disappointment, mistakes and failures—not miracles—and insisting that the focus be not on him but on what people can do together. And therein may lie the real theological meaning of what is occurring.

Obama was shaped in important ways by the distinctive faith-based grass-roots community organizing of which he was a part, and through which he was elected. This bottom-up

style of widespread democratic participation, which has been quietly growing in the US for some decades now—in and through churches, synagogues, mosques and other organizations—resists the divisiveness of partisan politics. It is similar to many of the civil society movements around the world that in recent years have grown exponentially. In such movements the focus is less on the leader than on what he or she inspires in others. What matters is their empowerment and active participation in working together to change policies and practices that threaten our common life. Yet, leaders are key in whether or not that occurs, whether in the political arena or in the church.

In the midst of the foreboding darkness of early 2009, the onset of a transformation in people's spirit, vision and commitment has become palpable. This can be sensed when walking around the neighborhood where Obama was living when he was elected, or in his father's village in Kenya, or in countless communities that are never in the media spotlight. The faces transfixed on the televised inauguration said it all.³

Of course, like other hopeful moments, the promise of this one may quickly fade. If its transformative power is to be sustained, it will be through remembering and reconnecting with the ideals and values that undergird who we are. It is in remembering that hope stays alive and becomes real through changed orientation and actions. For those formed by biblical traditions, for example,

Remembering that we are a people of promise, that we were once slaves and that the land is a gift, we would also remember that the Torah calls us to be a people of generosity and justice. We would remember that security in the land depends on how we treat the orphan, the widow, and the stranger. We would remember that the portion of our crops and our goods that we gave to the priests for distribution to the poor was the sacred portion (Deut 26:13). We would remember that the seventh year was a Sabbath year, a year of rest for the land and for the forgiveness of our debts. And we would remember that, if there was anyone in need in the community, we were not to be hardhearted or tightfisted toward neighbors, but to be openhanded to them.⁴

We have passed through a period when international outrage and prophetic critique against the ways of empire, as furthered through economic and political policies emanating from the US and elsewhere, have been necessary and appropriate. Vigilance regarding political promises and what is actually delivered needs to continue. The sin of greed and quests for unlimited profit which has gotten the world into the current economic mess will not end. In fact, this sin may even intensify as some scramble to recoup what they have lost. The logic and institutions by which empire operates have not changed with a new president. But cracks in empire have been exposed; will they only be patched up, so as to return to business or government as usual? Or will there be more significant changes? Rather than more prophetic outrage, the present moment calls for reconstructing institutions and mending the social fabric for the sake of the common good, especially the most vulnerable.

So how might we think of the light of Epiphany in 2009? It is not primarily a light that creates “stars”—of the human kind that people too often idolize—but a light that infuses people as a whole with a new sense of direction and purpose. People are transformed to participate in what God is doing, bringing a new order of justice, peace and reconciliation in the world, not just for Christians but for all people. This new order is, of course, not ultimately of this world, but of God’s fulfilled reign in the age of come. But it is because our yearning or hoping is anchored in this ultimate hope that we are empowered to go about seeking and working for such a new order here and now, even when our leaders become fallible with feet of clay, as they inevitably do. Leaders who know their own fallibility and still have the audacity of hope can inspire and encourage us in these efforts..

NOTES

¹ In that sense there have been important shifts sense in the past year since the publication of Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.), *Being Church in the Midst of Empire: Trinitarian Reflections*, Theology in the Life of the Church series, vol. 1 (LWF and Lutheran University Press, 2007). This book provides analyses of how empire operates and how churches can resist and respond theologically to empire.

² James Weldon Johnson “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” in *Thus Far by Faith: An African American Resource for Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), hymn 296. This was quoted by Rev. Joseph Lowery in his benediction at Obama’s inauguration. .

³ See Web sites such as www.boston.com/bigpicture/2009/the_inauguration_of_president.html

⁴ Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 69.

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