

It's been an eventful weekend! This particular weekend is a convergence of many significant events and themes: we had the presidential inauguration on Friday, the Women's March on Saturday, it is the "Week of Christian Unity," we are in the middle of the season of Epiphany which means "God's appearing" or "manifestation", and today is our Annual Meeting. While these may seem totally disjointed or unrelated, I believe that God is and has been made manifest to us as the people of God in this very time and place and, I believe, has a rather clear and timely message for us in our Scripture readings today, in order that, as the Collect says, "the whole world may perceive the glory of (God's) marvelous works."

This week also happens to be the one-year anniversary of a very significant moment in my life and in my family's life. One year ago Saturday my husband and our three children (including our [then] four-month old baby) were traveling home down a dark and winding single lane mountain road in Portland Oregon in our small Volkswagen when the driver of a large Tahoe SUV coming up the road hit the guard rail, lost control of her vehicle and came toward us head-on into our lane. As I veered into the dirt shoulder to try and avoid a head-on collision she overcorrected and came plunging into the left side of our car, hitting us with great force at the door where the baby was buckled in. To our right and in front of us was a cliff just a few feet away. We didn't go off the cliff despite the speed and force of the impact because there was a large mound of mud inexplicably sitting in the shoulder that stopped us. However, the impact was so forceful that it totaled our car, all airbags deployed and safety glass flew everywhere. I will never forget the sound of crunching metal and glass and the sick feeling that overwhelmed me in that moment, believing that our baby had just been crushed by this SUV. I then heard our oldest daughter screaming and our two year old crying. I struggled to get out of the car, asking if everyone was all right even as I fought through the mangled and broken door to get the baby out. There was so much broken glass that I couldn't see her – the shards were covering her, filling up her entire car seat. Somehow my husband and I managed to get the car seat out and as he attended to the other children I carried her seat to the remaining headlight to try and see, frantically but carefully removing all the glass that covered her. As soon as I saw her eyes

she looked at me with a look that said, "Mommy, I'm okay." I got her out and held her close, looking her all over – incredibly there was not a single scratch on her. I checked on the rest of the family and while everyone was horribly shaken, there were no significant injuries beyond some bruising and aches. I remember shaking with cold and adrenaline and then finally noticing that three drivers had stopped to help us. The first driver to stop was an Arabic Muslim gentleman who made sure we were okay, handed us his business card and offered to be a witness for us, reassuring us that it was not our fault. The second driver was a woman with a thick Russian accent who brought the baby and I a warm blanket from her car, wrapping it around us in that cold dark night and assuring us we were okay, that everything would be okay. The third driver to stop was a man from Lebanon who offered us his cell phone and called the police for us before going to check on the other driver who turned out to be fine. Their presence and help meant so much to us that night- each of them in their own way, helped me to keep it together when I thought I was going to fall apart and when we were too dazed and confused to know what to do. The three of them stayed with us until the police arrived and our mangled car was towed away.

That night safely in bed I couldn't sleep, so shaken and yet so grateful that we had all walked away from what could have so easily been a fatal car accident for us all. I kept thanking God over and over again for sending us angels and for sending those three visitors who had helped and comforted us. And then it hit me: we were in the season of Epiphany – the season that celebrates the visit of the three Magi and the manifestation of God to all people. All three of the drivers who stopped and helped us were not only strangers but foreigners from faraway lands in the East. (And if you've ever been to Portland you know that it is not a very diverse place- my husband and I have joked many times that the only three foreigners in Oregon were on that mountain that night.) In addition, each of them had brought us a gift of some kind in our moment of need and had ministered to us, complete strangers on the side of that dark road. For me, this was and is nothing less than a visit from three Magi from the East, sent by God in our time of need. I felt a sense of unity and love for these three strangers because they had shown me and my family such compassion and charity when we needed it.

Often when we find ourselves in the most difficult of times, when we are in danger or crisis, in division or distress, that is the time when God's presence can be most clearly seen and experienced. It can be like we are the people that Isaiah wrote about when he described, "a people who live in a land of deep darkness" because we continue to be a people who are divided with ongoing hateful and even violent acts around us – we can so easily be controlled by our fears and prejudices. We need God's light more than ever.

We are constantly tempted to erect walls between ourselves and others - not physical walls but metaphorical ones. I know that I am. These are walls we put between those who disagree with us and our politics or opinions or perspectives, walls for the outsiders, walls between us and them – the enlightened and the ignorant, the foreigner and the local, the right wing and the left wing, the Christian and the Muslim, the rich and the poor, this race and that. These walls are built first and foremost in our hearts and then they are erected by what we say and by what we do. And so when we speak out of fear or hatred about a group of people or start to demonize others for whatever reason, then we have stopped following the call of love –which casts out fear. In our epistle today St. Paul says, "I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.... that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." That purpose is God's purpose.

When we cling tightly to our fears we easily forget to keep our eyes on Jesus and his call to simply "Follow me." And we can't be of the same purpose then – God's purpose, because at that point we aren't following Christ at all but are being lead by fear. On the other hand, when we are indeed following Jesus, keeping our eyes on him and his calling on our lives, then whatever comes our way, we find clarity, faith, and strength to deal with it, and to deal with it together as the people of God as we seek God's will **together**.

Of course we may be called to speak up and speak out – but we are called to speak the truth in **love** – in ways that do not further inflame, incite fear, hatred, or the wounding of others, even when the truth is hard to hear. When called to speak the truth in love and act for justice and mercy we can know that God

is with us, even in the darkness and fear. We can take comfort in knowing that God may send the least expected to minister to and with us, and we can be ready to receive them, different as they may be from us. Because the path of following Jesus is not the path of least resistance – it is a difficult path of sacrifice that calls us to love our enemies, pray for those who hate us, and to work for love, justice, and mercy even among strangers, even among those we might otherwise despise.

After our near-fatal car accident I spent several weeks pondering that terrifying and yet miraculous event. In doing so I began to see several themes arise. First, it reminded me that God is present wherever we go and whatever we do, and God is there in the midst of deep darkness. Second, it reminded me that God is not only a God for all people, but is working in and through all kinds of people – even the stranger, even those most radically different from me, even those I might otherwise fear or hate. Third, it reminded me that the only path we can possibly embrace as people of God and followers of Jesus is the path of love that seeks unity with the many and diverse people on this planet. Sometimes that path calls for speaking the truth in love and taking risks for justice, yet often it is as simple as stopping to show the stranger a moment of compassion. These acts unify us and center us back on the one we are called to follow and imitate.

The car accident that night brought my family and these three strangers together in an unexpected but beautiful way. It was the crisis of the car accident that enabled it to happen, but God was so clearly with us in it.

Do not be afraid. Follow Jesus. Seek God's purpose. God's light shines - we can be the loving arms and hands of Christ in this time and place.

Amen.