

Today I want to talk about the cross. It may seem a strange thing to bring up during Epiphany. Shouldn't we focus on the brilliant glory of the incarnation and the wonderful things Jesus did that illuminate the glory of God? Well, yes. But we Christians look at the light of Christ through cross-shaped glasses.

In the first part of our reading from Matthew today, Jesus had heard that John was arrested. When he heard this, Jesus returned from his time of temptation in the desert and came home to Nazareth, and then moved to Capernaum before beginning his ministry on earth.

Outside of fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy (which is important) these movements of Jesus don't seem to have much meaning attached to them. But if we look at a map, we can see some important things that we might miss in the few sentences about the response of Jesus to the news of John's arrest.

John had been baptizing at the Jordan. The part of the Jordan river John was baptizing at is quite nearby the hubbub of Jerusalem. It's close to where both Jewish religious authorities and Roman power gathered. The wilderness where Jesus experienced his temptations was also nearby. It was a mere stone's throw away.

On a map, we can see that Nazareth, where Jesus had been living, is quite far away from Jerusalem, way up to the north. We're told in Matthew that when Jesus got back to Nazareth, he packed up and moved to Capernaum, which is even farther away to the north and east. Capernaum is about as far away as you could get from Jerusalem and still live in a Jewish town.

We're not told why Jesus moved so far away when he heard the news about John's arrest. It might have been because he wanted to fulfill prophecy, or it might have been a perfectly normal thing to do. Maybe the weather was nice near the sea at Capernaum. Maybe his mother was there. We don't know. But when I read about this, I automatically think of my father's relatives a couple of generations ago in Arkansas.

My father's side of the family were country folks. They frequently poached 'possums and hunted raccoons to make ends meet. And they frequently got crosswise with the law and skeddaddled across the border to Louisiana until things cooled off.

So I like to think that when Jesus heard that John was arrested, Jesus went back to Galilee and then even farther away than Nazareth so that he could escape the potential violence that his cousin John had stirred up back near Jerusalem. If John had been arrested, maybe Jesus thought they were coming for him too. It's easy to imagine that Jesus might have been in danger of being arrested by the Romans.

In Roman-occupied Israel, there were a lot of excellent ways of dying. Children died before the age of five fairly frequently. There were plenty of diseases that would carry you off at any age. And then there were the Romans who caused plenty of early deaths. And Jesus himself indicates the Jews commonly killed their own prophets. But none of this touched Jesus. He even slipped through the hands of his own people who tried to kill him early in his ministry.

There were a million ways Jesus could have died. But Jesus died on the cross. Part of me wants to think there was another way. Part of me wants to think the cross was a terrible, tragic mistake. But the rest of me understands that the cross was always there. The cross was always waiting for Jesus. Waiting for just the right time. I've learned over the years that it took the cross to complete the work of bringing in the light of Christ into the world.

Paul knows this too. Paul understands that Jesus had to move through death on the cross and that we must follow. Paul always points to the cross because the entire point of our faith is understood through the cross.

If our faith is founded on the complete reconciliation of creation to God through Christ then it simply can't have anything to do with arguments or a building or a budget or who does

the baptisms. No. Our faith must have everything to do with the cross. We must see through cross-shaped glasses.

The cross is how the light gets in. The cross is where death died, where Christ died so that he could rise again. And the cross is where we lay our own selves down to die so that we might take up the eternal life of Christ. And so that his life may shine through us.

Is there anything on the entire planet throughout all of human history more important than this? When we realize the reality of laying down our lives for Christ who laid down his life so that we might have eternal life, how can we possibly argue about anything?

Paul is doing way more than just fussing at a congregation in our reading today. He's preaching a sermon and he's doing it in words of one syllable for these people. We would be scandalized if someone preached this way.

Allow me to paraphrase Paul. Paul seems to be saying: Stop fighting with each other. There is absolutely nothing to argue about when you look at life through cross-shaped glasses. There is one point to our lives together, so focus on that and only that.

Paul seems to be saying: Stop bickering about other people. There is only one person who is important and that person is Jesus. There is only one life to be concerned about, and that life is the life of Christ that we share. So focus on that and only that.

Paul seems to be saying: God went to a lot of trouble to make sure his only son died on a cross so that we might be saved, and don't you dare belittle the cross by taking your eyes off of it. Don't you dare take those cross-shaped glasses off.

This is a hard message that Paul gives. It's a wakeup call. It probably pulled his readers up short. I know it pulls me up short. I'm glad this letter was preserved and included in the Bible. I think we could all use a wakeup call from time to time. I think we all need to be reminded sometimes of the point of our gathering here every week.

When we look through cross-shaped glasses, we see that there is no point in arguing about anything or judging anyone. When we wear cross-shaped glasses we are able to unite in mind and purpose. When we see through cross-shaped glasses, we see beyond the building and the budget to eternal life in our mortal lives.

With cross-shaped glasses we see that the cross is not the end, but the beginning. We see that all our endings, while painful, are merely seeds waiting to spring to new life, healed life, and eternal life.

So let's put on our cross-shaped glasses. Let's be of one mind and purpose. Let's put away fear and take up our cross and walk forward into the unknown. The path is always new and we don't always know what's around the next corner. But the path is illuminated with the eternal light of Christ shining above us, shining within us, and pouring out from our brothers and sisters who are with us.

Let's put on our cross-shaped glasses today, and never take them off.

Amen.