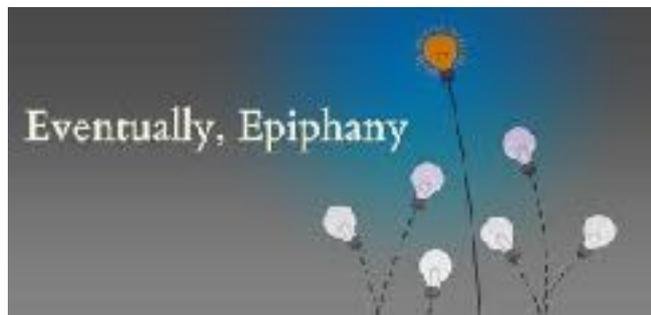


Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, January 26, 2020
Third Sunday after Epiphany

“Darkness, Wilderness, and Galilee: Places Bringing Epiphany”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-4
Christian Scripture: Matthew 4:12-23



Friends, welcome to our third of six sermons this Christian season entitled “Eventually, Epiphany”.

As I mentioned during the welcome, Stephanie’s parents (Sue and Raymond), and thus Lydia and Ana’s grandparents, are with us (from Rhode Island) this morning. Therefore, in their honor I would like to share with you some epiphany humor.



The story is told that a lovely couple from Rhode Island once went to church in Massachusetts and found on the wall a golden telephone with a sign below it saying, “Calls \$10,000 for three minutes.” Confused the woman asked the custodian. He explained that this was a direct line to God. The woman then went to churches in Maine, New Hampshire, and New York. Everywhere she found the same golden telephone with the same price tag. Then she went to a church in Vermont. There she saw the same telephone, but this time with a sign saying, “Calls fifty cents.” She asked the custodian, “How is this possible when everywhere else the calls are so much more expensive?” The custodian replied, “In Vermont, it’s a local call.”



Yes, indeed, despite being one of the most secular states in the union, communications with God resulting in epiphanies happen here in Vermont!

We have heard from Bonnie and Lee thus far this Epiphany season. Today, we hear from Holly Kennedy. Holly’s epiphany testimony speaks a great deal about from what kind of places epiphanies often come.



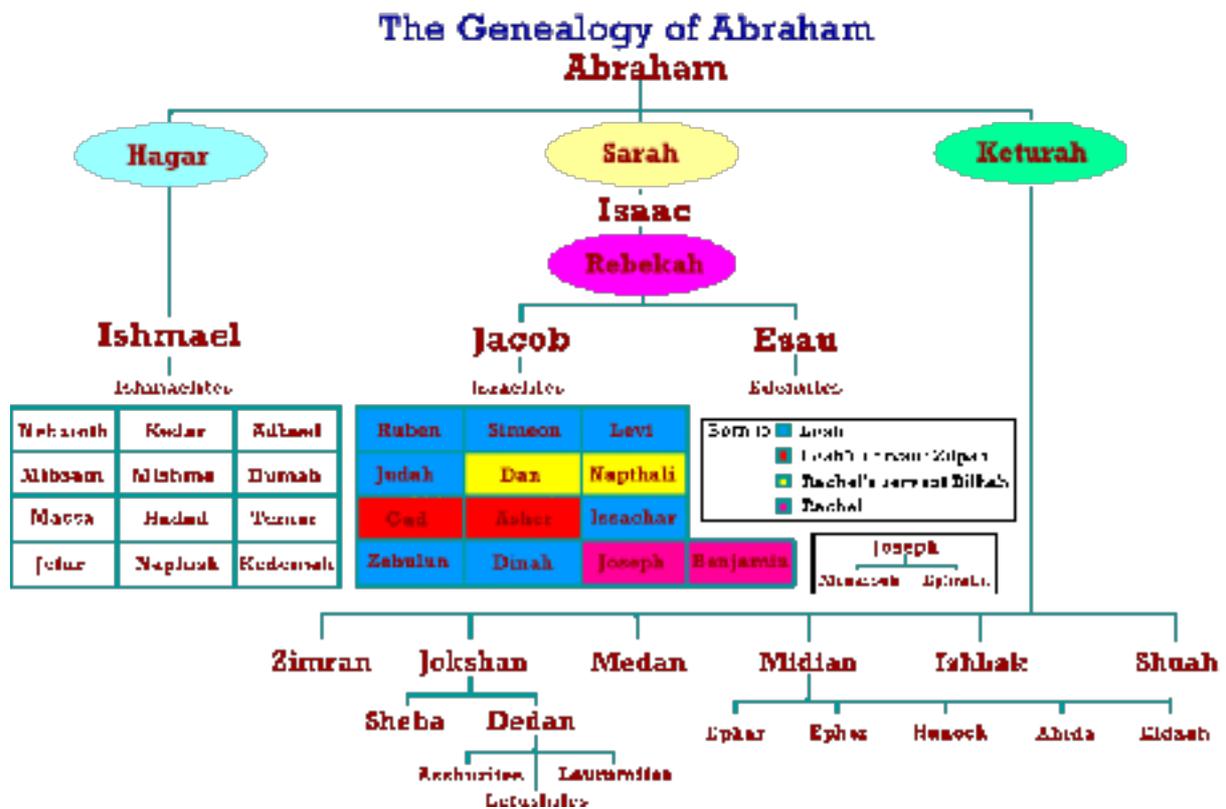
Epiphanies often come from emotional states of depression, loneliness, and emptiness. These ‘states’ can also be understood as ‘spaces’ that can be translated to ‘places’. Thus epiphanies often occur on the periphery, in places of darkness, and wilderness. Her story touches directly on our scripture lesson this morning, and for this reason I treasure her and her willingness to teach us this morning.



The Hebrew and the Christian scripture readings both refer to two places: “the land of Zebulum and Nephtali”. Of course, the author of Matthew is quoting the author of Isaiah to tell us that from these places the light of God is revealed. In other words, from Zebulum and

Nephtali will come revelation, wisdom, enlightenment, peace, and clarity - brought from epiphany.

Before Holly speaks I would like to first set the scene for epiphany in the two places of Zebulum and Nephtali. What are their unique characteristics that enable them to be places from which epiphany is experienced?

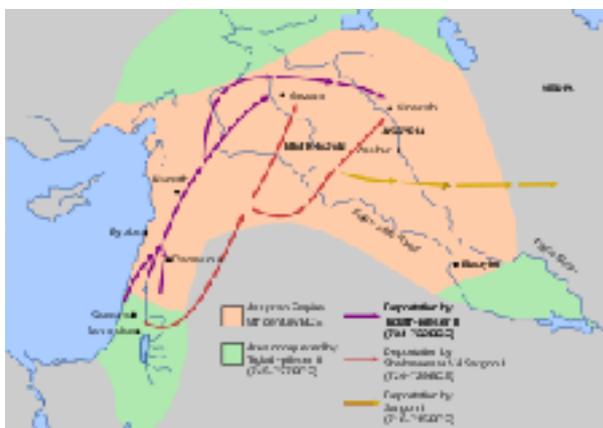


To learn about Zebulum and Nephtali, we first we have to examine genealogy. Everyone remembers Abraham, right? Abraham had a grandson. His name was Jacob, A.K.A. Israel. Israel is Jacob and Jacob is Israel. What is known as the ‘Holy Land’, the ‘Promised Land’, was promised to Israel’s descendants after the exodus from Egypt. And

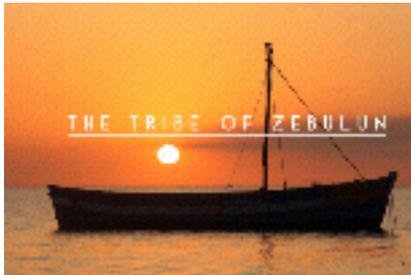
this region, known also as 'Israel', was then passed-on to Israel's twelve sons, two of whom were named Zebulum and Naphtali.



Zebulum and Naphtali were regions in northeast Israel. So, let's suggest that Zebulum and Naphtali are situated like New England is in the United States, specifically Vermont and New Hampshire, in the northeast. Over time, these regions of Zebulum and Naphtali came to be known during Jesus' time as 'Galilee'. Let us ask ourselves, 'What is unique about Zebulum and Naphtali, AKA 'Galilee'? Well, two things really.



One: During Isaiah's time the Assyrian empire ravaged this region on their way to the Mediterranean Sea before occupying all of the region.¹ The Assyrians started in the north what the Babylonians would later do the south: destroy it, ruin it, burn it, slaughter the population, enslave the people, and taken them into captivity, into exile. This is why the author of Isaiah calls those who are living in the regions of Zebulum and Naphtali "the people who walked in darkness" (Isaiah 9:2).

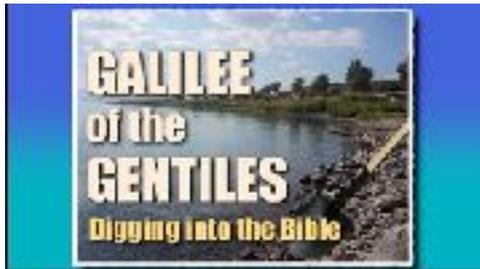


This is why throughout our Hebrew scripture reading, Isaiah the region is considered "degraded" by the Lord. Isaiah refers to the land as a place of "anguish", darkness, and gloom (Isaiah 9:2). Yet from this place, Isaiah's prophesy announces, a great light, an epiphany, will be revealed. It will bring "abundant joy" and "great rejoicing" (Isaiah 9:3). Isaiah prophesies that the "yoke that burdens will be broken, the pole on their shoulder removed, and the rod of the taskmaster destroyed" (Isaiah 9:4). And this great light, this revelation, is

¹ Interestingly, the author of Mathew kind of goofs-up the geography in his quoting of Isaiah. Isaiah was likely referring to the Mediterranean Sea when referring to the sea in Isaiah 9:1 (the Assyrians would have been aiming for that coast). Whereas the author of Matthew is suggesting that the sea is the Sea of Galilee in 4:13 (where the fisherman disciples are) which is not the same sea to which Isaiah referred!

interpreted by the writer of Matthew to be Jesus (Matthew 4:16).

Recall, Jesus says that his yoke is light? Remember? Jesus knows this scripture from Isaiah, and he declares that he removes the yoke from the people (Matthew 11:30).



Now, the second and last thing about Galilee is, unlike farther south near the capital Jerusalem and the Temple, new ideas, including Jesus and new ideas about a messiah, could be heard and accepted much easier. You see, it was not just the Assyrians and Babylonians that had been in the district of Galilee. Alexander the Great also toured through the area a few years before Jesus. Therefore, Galilee was a region where a great many gentiles, or non-Jews, lived and therefore there were many Jews who had some interface with non-Jews. So, being a bit farther away from the metropole, and being a land that was an intersection, or cross-roads, of large armies and the cultures they brought with them, made the area of Galilee a place open to new ideas.



Scholars today suggest that this region of cross-cultural relations fostered people, like the fishermen disciples, who, while faithful Jews, were open to a message that was not so orthodox.



Friends, the places of Zebulum and Naphtali teach us from where epiphany, the light and wisdom of God, can come: places formerly of darkness, anguish, and gloom. It is places like these that any light is best revealed! And lastly, it is places on the periphery, maybe even as far away from Centre Church as Hinsdale, that are less constrained by ritual, orthodoxy, tradition, and authority of the center that allow for the light, the light of Jesus Christ, to penetrate our hearts and minds as it did the earliest disciples of Christ.

So, this morning, thanks be to God the periphery, for Galilee, and for Hinsdale!

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".