

The Big Picture—3rd Sunday After the Epiphany

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[Isaiah 9:1-4](#)

[Psalm 27:1, 4-9](#)

[1 Corinthians 1:10-18](#)

[Matthew 4:12-23](#)

We have more passages today from Scripture filled with images of hope and images of light. As you know the people of Israel, the Hebrew people of the Old Testament, were a little people. And they were pushed around a lot by larger global powers. So, the prophet Isaiah speaks to a moment here when many territories that once the people called home—Zebulun, Naphtali, Galilee—have been conquered and annexed by the Assyrians.

The *Little Picture* here is sadness, and loss. But part of the job Isaiah and all prophets is to help the people zoom out, help them see the *Bigger Picture*.

Even though things are looking bad now, Isaiah says the Lord will deliver us in the long run—

“The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.”

In the original sense, this prophecy is talking about a new king, to protect and defend God's people. But as we heard in Matthew's Gospel, we see that the picture of this prophecy can, and did, get even bigger. Matthew takes this very same passage from Isaiah and sees that it is about Jesus, And Jesus, we believe, is not only the savior of Israel... but the savior of the whole world!—this really is the Bigger Picture!

But we have to admit, the present moment, our Little Picture, for us and for all people, whether full of comfort or suffering, really clouds our minds. It's all we can see. But like the Psalmist, as people of faith, we strive to keep that Big Picture, the big frame, where God is in charge, before our eyes.

You can hear the Psalmist reminding themselves—and us—to stay focused on faith: The Psalmist writes: Even now my head is lifted up above my enemies who surround me. Therefore, I will offer sacrifice in the sanctuary, sacrifices of rejoicing; I will sing and make music to the Lord.

Pay attention: enemies are surrounding the Psalmist! But they keep that Big Picture close, The Psalmist sings, rejoices to the Lord, whom they believe will hear them and save them—in **the long run**. But it is so tough to do this—to keep this Big Picture in mind! And, strangely enough, there is quite a hazard with Big Picture thinking. Big Picture thinking is almost always controversial.

Despite all the hope and the salvation we believe in... when we zoom all the way out to the prophetic-perspective, the Isaiah-perspective—the Gospel-perspective, despite that—pretty often I think we *hate* seeing the Big Picture.

Take for example the people that St. Paul is writing to in his first letter to the Corinthians. Not only have lost the Big Picture, but if you read on in the letter, you can tell that they just hate it. Because, sinners that we are, when our Little Picture looks *good*, well, then we are very content with it.

Why would we want anything to disturb it? I have my two cars, and my family, and my lawn looks good, and everything's fine—don't mess with me. Don't tell me it's all going to pass away, and I need to think about eternity. Don't tell me I need to think about my neighbors who are suffering.

St. Paul writes: "It has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you... What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas...'" These people are not thinking about Christ, about the Big Picture of God's saving love. They care about their factions, who started their church, how prestigious they can be or how loyal they are to their little group.

You all had to navigate this in the merger process. God bless you all because you did merge, you did see the Big Picture of God's saving grace. But you also saw the fear of Big Picture thinking all the way. Some folks literally said: I belong to Christ Lutheran And other folks said: I belong to Good Shepherd. The Big Picture calls us out of our little boxes and forces us to look at the world in just a fraction of the big, big way that God sees it.

And since we are still in the season of MLK Day and February, Black History month, is around the corner, (it's important to always remember) part of the Big Picture in America is racism. You know, you will always see people, generation after generation, very shaky in America talking about race or racial injustice. But don't let it surprise you, because, like I said, people really don't like the Big Picture.

In Florida they are pulling an AP high school course from curriculums called African American Studies. There are rumblings that MLK Day shouldn't be a federal holiday. You've all heard the

battle about school boards and this new boogie-man called: "Critical Race Theory." I hate to say it, but this debate is not new, it's as old as America, much older actually. This is white folks turning away from the Big Picture.

Yes, the Big Picture does hurt sometimes... Americans really don't like to face the reality that generation after generation Black folks have been systematically treated differently. Starting with the Reconstruction Era, right at the end of the Civil War, when these enslaved peoples were newly freed, they were very anxious about their future. The Army promised each family 40 acres and a mule. Well, those acres happened to be reclaimed plantation land in the south. And before long congress overturned this war-time ruling—and also added a law that stated any unemployed and homeless Black folks were to [sign sharecropping contracts or] be arrested immediately. So, all the land was taken away like that—and all the people were instantly [shackled again to the land or] homeless and unemployed.

Did you also know that the United States Army started a bank for Black folks, for [formerly enslaved people] after the civil war too? It was a great idea—an invitation and a way to build wealth. But the Army was not so great at managing the money, they invested it in bad bonds and bad futures, the bank collapsed and all the wealth of this so fragile group was lost. Trust in financial institutions was shattered for generations.

The Big Picture goes on and on. You all know how important home equity is in building wealth and stability. Well, in the 1940 and 50s banks everywhere in the country, especially in CT, simply wouldn't lend to Black folks, even Black veterans, looking to buy houses in "white" areas because it would ruin housing prices in those neighborhoods...

And I could go on about unequal sentencing laws, unfair education funding policy and so forth. This is all controversial stuff. Stuff that news pundits argue about. And I'm sure many of you today here are not happy I'm bringing this up.

People have all kinds of responses to the Big Picture—you could say: it's not my fault, don't blame me, it's not true, it's disloyal to America... But when you're really looking at the Big Picture—whether it's church mergers or racist policies in our country—it doesn't matter whose fault it is. And I can think of no better way to be loyal to America than trying to help her citizens.

In God's Big Picture, nobody is really talking about *us* or *America*, we're talking about God's little children, our God-made brothers and sisters—it's the *Big* Picture. And as followers of Jesus, as fishers of people, we are called to see the Big Picture. In the Big Picture there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the Big Picture we all belong to each other. In the Big Picture we care about the misfortunes and trials and pain of our neighbors—regardless of whose fault it is. In the Big Picture we see exactly what St. Paul says: through the Cross of

Christ, because of God's mercy, we all belong to God—and therefore we all belong to each other.

God deals in *whole* pictures. God tells the long-run story. The long-run story is that we are loved, that we infinitely matter, and that, just like Peter and Andrew and James and John, we are called to be with Jesus. That's true of all people, without exception. And as followers of Jesus, as the baptized, as members of Christ's own body—we are called to let our Little Picture grow, little by little, into God's Big Picture.

That's why Jesus is called light, why we say with the Psalmist—the Lord is my light and my salvation, why we say with Isaiah—on us a light has shined. Light isn't a color. Light is energy—light helps us see. Jesus our light helps us to see the Big Picture all the time. The light helps us fish for people, and continue Jesus' work of healing and helping and forgiving and loving people.

Isaiah's prophecy is true—For the “yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.” But in the Big Picture the rod of oppression is not racism. The bar is across our shoulders [white peoples' shoulders] in the end. The yoke of burden is our own being stuck in the Little Picture—

But God, today, is breaking it! The invitation to see, the light of Christ, is always shining.

Amen.