

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Epiphany III

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The season of Epiphany is about revelation—the revealing of God's Messiah to the world. Each week during the season, our scripture readings provide us with a different glimpse of God's Messiah and the purpose for which he came among us. These revelations expose us to the Messiah, and the Messiah to us, and through this process we come to realize our need for redemption and the Messiah's desire to redeem us. I have come to experience that any encounter with God's Messiah, either by chance or by design, changes our lives and circumstance. We no longer remain the same. Paul Tillich argues that “The Old Being has a mark of disintegration and death. The New Being puts a new mark over the old one. Out of disintegration and death, something is born of eternal significance.”

This observation brings to mind the experience of the brothers Peter and Andrew; and James and John. These men met Jesus who called them to follow him. They had no idea what it would have meant to follow him, or what it meant to be fishers of people. But they followed anyway because the power of the encounter was one in which they could not resist the call to follow. These brothers did not know what it meant to fish for people, but over time, they came to understand that to fish for people was to invite others to share in the good news that the kingdom of God has come near.

The call of the Messiah is one which saves us from sin, from ourselves, and even from the darkness of human division. For not only does sin diminish us, but it reduces our capacity to shine with God's goodness.

And so the invitation is to repent, to make a one hundred and eighty degree turn, to rediscover the vision of God for you. To be able to make this turn is to acknowledge that the kingdom of heaven has come near, and that we can not only access the kingdom but we can also bring it to life for others.

The call of the Messiah is one which brings new meaning and direction to those of us who live under a sad illusion shaped in part by the darkness of pride. You know, John was arrested because he spoke up against Herod-a king who wanted to silence him. The pride of the powerful often leads them to use the power of their office to silence their critics.

An interesting anecdote is that the very law which John accused Herod of violating is that very same law which Henry VIII quoted in his dispute with a pope he felt was unjustifiably abusing his power.

The light of the Messiah highlights human deficiencies, and brings to the fore the human need for salvation. The call of the Messiah is one which makes us accountable not only to Him but to every single person. That is why Paul argues that the good news of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, because for such people there is this assumption that the human being-you and I, and in fact everyone else is infinitely capable of taking care of him/herself. But as free as we are, the downside of that freedom to choose either good or evil is also our limitation.

A nineteenth century Russian by the name of Michail Bakunin wrote in his book *God and The State* "Since God is everything, the real world and the human being are nothing...God appears, the human being becomes nothing, and the greater the deity the more miserable the human race becomes." Bakunin's broader thesis was that God and human beings are one and the same, and if humans are to be free beings, we must do away with the concept of God. In his mind, the idea of God stifles human freedom.

But we all know that God and humans are not one and the same, and we cannot argue that the freedom to choose either good or evil is comparable to the eternal goodness of the divine whose freedom is not defined by choice. Until we experience the immense goodness of God, until we come to the same place as the Psalmist, and with full confidence in the abiding salvation of God, we will not be able to cross that threshold which tells of human reliance on God. I have come to understand that the goodness of God draws all things to itself. And for us to run from such overflowing goodness is a perverse form of self-deprivation.

There is a story of two frogs. One lived in a well while the other lived in the sea. The one who lived in the well was so full of himself that he always thought that the well was the most expansive space that anyone could ever live. One day, the frog who lived in the sea visited the one who lived in the well. The frog who lived in the well was so excited about the visit and spoke so highly about the well and how big the well is and that the well was even bigger than the sea. The frog who lived in the sea asked the frog who lived in the well if he had seen the sea before. He replied that he had not. The guest frog then told the host frog that he must definitely come with him to see the sea. He agreed and so they set off. The frog who lived in the sea took the frog who lived in the well to the top of a hill overlooking the sea, and the moment this frog saw the sea, his head blown into a thousand pieces.

Until we realize how small our world is in comparison to how big the world is, we are likely to assume that our world is the most biggest and most important. It is precisely because our world is so small and often insignificant that the light beams into the darkness into which human life is shrouded and makes possible the kingdom which we all long for. The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, the prophet Isaiah said, and by Paul's standard, the power of that light should be one which should move the people of Corinth beyond division.

Paul had shared with the people of Corinth the good news of the kingdom but he now wonders what had happened to the people, because the news coming out of Corinth was about the division within the church-each claiming allegiance to someone. In his letter, Paul questions the basis of the division, because within the body of the kingdom of heaven, there should be no division, all seek reconciliation with God and with others. Paul believed that the people who have come to the saving faith in Jesus should look to their new life in Jesus as one which makes it possible for them to create healing within the society, and to bring life out of death.

A couple of days ago we had a new president. Yesterday, we witnessed marches across the world against the new president. It wasn't coincidental. Some of the protesters were in Kenya. I asked myself, how in the world would women in Kenya march against our president? In fact, we do not only have a Herod who will arrest John, but it looks like we have a Herod who simply cannot help himself because he is so self-absorbed that he only listens to himself. But if we believe that the kingdom of God has come near, then, like John, we have to speak up, we have to resist any effort that undermines our belief in the values of the kingdom.

Each of our call may be different but the kingdom isn't different. Each of our call may be different but it is the same person who calls each one of us into that same kingdom. Each of our call may be different but it is the same person who makes us new. Each of our call may be different but it is the same person who offers new life to those who choose to obey. To obey is an expression of our love for the one who saves us. And so when he called me, I chose to obey, and I followed. Will you also choose to obey and follow Him with me? Amen.