

Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 14

Jesus is the Son of God, beloved and anointed with the Holy Spirit. What does that mean? If I sound a little like Luther, that is the intent. If I sound a little flippant, that might be part of the intent as well. The thing I am trying to say is that I am not sure that we would recognize an incarnate deity if one were to walk into our office. What would you expect to see if God showed up in the flesh? Lightning bolts streaking from his forehead? A bright glow which drives you out of the room? A flock of woodland creatures cavorting at his feet? Would the temperature go up, or down? Perhaps you would recognize him if he was surrounded by a myriad of angels.

The season of Epiphany presents us with a number of expected and unexpected identifying markers for the Son of God, clues to Jesus' deity. Some of these are not what we might think are signs of his godhood, but don't worry, by the end of the season, Jesus will be arrayed in the bright clothes and flanked on either side by some heavenly visitors. In the meantime, however, we have these other clues as to the divinity of Jesus. Today, our first clue is a prophet's statement and we see that he does Godlike things.

Obviously, Jesus showing up in glory would be terrifying to us. We would know it, but we would be terrified of it. It would seem that Jesus did not come initially in glory for this very reason. It was only for his trusted friends that he glowed on Transfiguration's mountain. For the rest of us, he showed up as a humble carpenter's son and itinerant preacher from Nazareth. Interestingly, the ones who seem to have most accurately identified Jesus were the demons and demoniacs. The rest of the folks at the time were pretty clueless, including the disciples. In a wonderful twist upon the Roman soldiers who seem to have been oppressing the Christian community of Mark, Mark identifies a "legion" of demons in one demoniac and has the centurion who crucified him join the demons in getting Jesus more right than the disciples.

Probably our first thought when reading the prior paragraph is that the best clue that Jesus is God is that he does some miracles. Interestingly enough, that is a very post-enlightenment position. At the time that the Gospels were written and indeed for much of human history, it has simply been assumed that some folks can do miracles. The prophets of the OT were some of them. Elijah and Elisha each raised a dead child to life, healed lepers, and occasionally fed hungry people miraculously. The miracles alone are not really the proof we think them to be. Even less so, in this age of scientific skepticism, the second or third hand account which your people hear of Jesus' miracles is not proof. By the time they hear it, it has gone through 2000 years of history, the Gospel writer, a translator, and you. Don't expect telling a miracle story to prove much of anything to your hearers, unless they are already convinced.

The season of Epiphany will point us toward several of Jesus' miracles. But that will not be the primary clue that this carpenter's son from Nazareth is more than he might first appear to be. The first attribute to which the season will point us is the attractiveness of Jesus. I don't mean that in the sense of Hollywood and beautiful people, but that people are drawn to Jesus. He collects people, he gathers them. There is something which brings them to Him, of course we would probably say that is the Spirit, but there are other suggestions as well. Today we will hear of

Jesus gathering his first disciples. That act of gathering people is one of the great clues that Jesus is more than he seems to be.

Now, there is more to this story of course. We even get a bit of the miraculous in the story as Jesus seems to have knowledge which would not be available to a normal human being, seeing Nathaniel under the fig tree. At the same time, don't be too distracted by the miraculous that you miss this important fact about Jesus: people came to him.

This of course gives us occasion to do a little thinking today. Many good and some evil folks in the past century or so have been remarkably adept at gathering people. Billy Graham in his prime could fill a stadium with people. Even our own W. A. M. Meier was eagerly heard by millions every Sunday on the Lutheran Hour. (My dad told of being a child and stopping one Sunday afternoon for gas in a "Catholic" town only to be surprised that they were also listening to the Lutheran Hour inside the gas station. There was hope for papist gas station owners!) But there were others who gathered great crowds. One only has to watch the old newsreel clips from Nazi Germany to see the massive crowds which flocked to hear Hitler speak. They did not seem to be coerced at least not all of them. They seemed genuinely to be enthralled by him. Likewise Jim Jones was able to fill a compound in Guyana with hundreds of people who would all drink his toxic brew because he asked them to. Collecting people and forming them into a group cannot be held up as a proof positive that you are dealing with the divine.

But the Bible does seem clear that gathering people is something that God does. Isaiah had foretold it. Abraham was promised that he would be a blessing to all the nations of the earth and every family would call him a father. John sees a countless number of folks in heaven in his apocalypse. In the Old Testament lesson today a little boy hears the voice and becomes the great prophet Samuel, gathered to God's side.

Jesus is still calling folks today. As we have often said, 100,000 new Christians are made every day of the year. And that is really just the maintenance number Christianity has to have in order to replace the dying ones. Growth, such as we see in India and Africa and Asia suggests that the number is in fact larger. Jesus is still gathering people, actively and persuasively.

Do we fail to see Jesus today because we are looking in the wrong place? Have we got an image of him which blinds us to see the present Christ? Epiphany would reveal Jesus to us. I think the preacher will want to ask the question of himself and his congregation: Can we see him?

I have elsewhere commended a book by N. T. Wright, *Simply Jesus* (2011) in which he really asserts that modern conservative Christianity and rationalistic anti-Christianity have both really constructed a caricature of Jesus. They both miss him, in a real sense. I found his identification of who Jesus really was to be quite Lutheran in many senses, if not entirely. He probably wouldn't pass LCMS doctrinal review, but you might enjoy it. The book, along with its companion, *Simply Christian*, is intended for a lay audience, but it is not simplistic. It might make a good January or February pre-Lenten read.

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of Your people and grant us Your peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Almighty and everlasting God – you just cannot wear him out, not with your sin, not with a whole broken world worth of sin. He just outlasts you with his love, his mercy, and his grace.

He governs all things in heaven and on earth. Governors, remember, don't necessarily cause everything to be within their realm. They are responsible for making sure that justice is served and that the laws are enforced, but they don't turn us into robots or automatons of some sort. Seems hard to claim that God is governing this earth these days. Terrorists seem to present us with a world which owns no divine governance. Too many Christians don't even think about this because they are effectively deists, they imagine that God's governance is up there but not actually involved with this poor broken world. How does one preach to a situation where mothers in Nigeria have waited years for daughters who have been captured by monsters? Or what about the families of the students in Mexico who disappeared and it appears that this happened with police collusion? There are no answers forthcoming.

If we point to the other kingdom, government, and say that it is of God (Romans 13), was ISIS a government in the territory it controlled? What about the petty dictators and monsters who rule other parts of the world today?

How do we preach a God who governs this world? What sort of peace do our people expect? Can we blame them if they are cynical and casting about for some peace which the world cannot give but looking in the wrong places. We would recommend the Voice of the Martyrs as a good place to listen.

To what will we point if we would show someone the rule of God today, the present tense governance of the world? Notice the prayer does not say that he will govern all things, but that he does right now. How is the kingdom of God, his authority, his gracious and righteous rule expressed today?

I would tend to point the hearer to the very absolution we speak on Sunday mornings. Here is the righteous rule of God showing up. He has the authority to forgive, he has vested that in his servants, and they are forgiving in God's name. That is an authoritative act. That is kingdom of God. I like to think of this as real contemporary worship. I do not forgive in the past tense or the future tense, but the present. I forgive you! Jesus is governing/ruling this world not by punishing sins, but through the act of forgiveness. Scripture is clear, there is a punishment, that is real, but the rule of Christ is expressed today in their forgiveness.

One can take this even further. Jesus said, "Repent, the kingdom of heaven is here!" and then he went on to heal the sick, open the eyes of the blind, feed the hungry, befriend the lost and lonely, and much more. Today he is still "reigning" that way through his church wherever they are

feeding the hungry, seeking the lost, opening medical clinics, and having a clothing drive for the homeless.

Today we want him to mercifully hear the prayers of His people and to grant us His peace through all our days. The real traction on this one seems to be the idea that he is granting us “his peace.” Many of us greet each other on Sunday mornings with the “peace of the Lord.” But I wonder what it is we mean when we extend that peace to one another? I am assuming that it is more than a platitude and a simply nice thought. We are giving something, what is it?

Lest you perish in anticipation, here is my thought on what that peace really is. It is a promise that I will view you, the person to whom I am giving this peace, through the lens of the Lord, especially the work of Jesus on the cross where he died for you. That is not a statement that you are necessarily a good person or even a likeable person, but it is a statement that Jesus has died for you and in that gift God has made you and continues to make you perfect. You are fit for heaven itself. A real and a genuine peace can exist between us, not on the basis of our shared likes or mutual affection, or simply on the fact that you have not made me angry, yet, but a real peace is built upon the gift from the Lord which we share.

This peace is something that Jesus must give. Honestly, I have a hard time ginning this up, even if the score-keeping old bean-counting sinner in me could think of it. I need God’s help on this one and hence the prayer. This is the peace that passes understanding and which keeps our hearts and minds with Christ Jesus. That means that I can say to the scoundrel and the dear little old lady, “peace be with you.” and mean it! Jesus has died for both of them equally, and they both needed him to die for them. I have had the privilege of having a number of criminals in my congregations. Not someone actively pursuing crime, mind you, but men and women who had appeared before a judge and found guilty, sometimes of rather nasty crimes. I call it a privilege because my sweet joy was to remind them of what that earthly judge could not – Jesus is the real Judge who has paid the real price for that crime. My harder job was always the little old ladies in the parish who wondered why they needed such a Jesus. (Never underestimate the bile that can reside in the dark corner of the heart of that little old lady who seems so sweet!)

Readings

I Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20)

Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.

² At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. ³ The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

⁴ Then the LORD called Samuel, and he said, “Here I am!” ⁵ and ran to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So he went and lay down.

⁶ And the LORD called again, “Samuel!” and Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call, my son; lie down again.” ⁷ Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

⁸ And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. ⁹ Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

¹⁰ And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant hears.” ¹¹ Then the LORD said to Samuel, “Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. ¹² On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. ¹³ And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. ¹⁴ Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli’s house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever.”

¹⁵ Samuel lay until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. And Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. ¹⁶ But Eli called Samuel and said, “Samuel, my son.” And he said, “Here I am.” ¹⁷ And Eli said, “What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also if you hide anything from me of all that he told you.” ¹⁸ So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. And he said, “It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him.”

¹⁹ And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground.

²⁰ And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD. ²¹ *And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD.*

For many of us who preach, we will address an elderly crowd of folks who keenly feel the absence of their children. Do our people feel like Eli and feel that God’s judgment is coming down on them? Their children have left and they feel like they are to blame for that. But here is also Gospel for them. The Lord is the one who raised up Samuel despite Eli. As we confess in the third article of the Creed, it is the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the church. Undoubtedly we have failed as parents and mentors and repentance is simply our way. But we cannot take to ourselves the responsibility and duty which belongs to God. He keeps, he gathers, he enlightens and like he did with Samuel, he is patiently calling over and over again. It took him four times with Samuel and he did not give up.

We were also struck that God stood there (vs 10). Samuel appears to have run by God three times before his eyes were open to see God standing there. The word Samuel uses to reply to God is “Hinneni” which is the same word that Israeli children use today when the teacher calls roll call at the beginning of class. It means, “here!” One gets the picture of a sweet little kid who wants to please his teacher. Samuel is just a nice kid.

What a text, I love this text. It is one of the more influential texts in the OT. Samuel, whose name means "God has listened" has not been redeemed by the usual sacrifice, the sacrifice that we saw Mary and Joseph making for Jesus in the readings the First Sunday after Christmas. Instead of making that sacrifice, his mother, Hannah, had given him to the priest. She did not redeem him. I gather that Eli really came to love the kid, but you have to wonder if he would not have preferred the lamb chop that would have come to him from the sacrifice at the time.

It says that the word of the Lord was rare in those days, there were no visions, no prophets railing against the sins of the Israelites and no judges who were capably leading them into battle. The Lord was rare. I think that line could make a real impact on the regulars who will likely be sitting before us on a January morning this week. I also think it odd then, that the editors of the text did not include verse 21 which I have above. With Samuel there, the Word became present again. When he was a child, however, the Word of the Lord was rare, he seemed distant and his voice seemed muted. I think lots of folks read their Bibles and hear the stories of mighty deeds and miracles and the like and wonder why their own lives seem so mundane, why the Lord seems so distant from them. This might be a good handle to access the hearts and minds of your hearers. The days of prophets and miracles were infrequent in the millennia of OT history. We may only hear about the odd times.

That feeling could be intensified if they are feeling the pinch of some current crisis. Hardly a week goes by that some mass killing or act of terror doesn't fill our newsfeeds. It frightens us and we wonder where this world is headed. We might also ask where this gift-giving God is when I could really use him right now. If your mortgage payment is overdue or the credit card debt is piling up, or your business is fielding no phone calls and is having a hard time collecting on its accounts, God might seem like he is a long ways away. If you are waiting for test results from the doctor or waiting alone for a phone call from your adult child, God can seem a long ways away.

But the distance of God is more than that. God is not speaking and the folks are not listening. God calls Samuel and it says that Samuel does not recognize him because he does not yet know the Lord. Is that a suggestion that Eli has not done a good job of teaching him? The Bible will not have much good to say about the way he raised his own sons. Was he failing this little boy who had been given to him as well?

Samuel, thinking it is Eli, runs to the old man. Three times it takes before aged Eli to recognize the voice of God. He should have been in tune to God, he should have been the first to see it, but he does not. Finally he realizes that this is the voice of God and instructs the little boy what to say. This too sounds like today doesn't it. We might not recognize Jesus if he did show up. Are we expecting him? The ancient Christians used to pray, "Maranatha" every Sunday expecting Christ to come. It appears that they went to every Eucharist with the idea that this might be the day that Jesus shows up. And doesn't he show up? Do we shuffle to the front of Church, stick out our hand and go through the motions of the Eucharist, motions and facial expressions which suggest that this is a chore and not a delight? Do even our motions, the rote actions, betray that

we are not expecting something special? Do we pray, “come next week, after I get my house cleaned” or “not yet, Lord, I have too much to do.”?

Finally Eli realizes what is going on and instructs the young boy in what to say, “Speak Lord, your servant is listening.” While attending Concordia, St. Louis I heard a story which may have been apocryphal, but merits repetition as an illustration. A rather pompous old professor at the seminary was once traversing the chapel late in the evening. He did not realize that one of the students was up in the balcony. This student had seen him making his way in the dark across this large room. Effecting his best God voice the student boomed from the balcony “Richard, Richard.” (That’s not his real name). The pompous old professor stopped and quoted Samuel at this point.

Of course the student thought it was rather funny, but it spoke of openness to the Lord on the part of the old man. He at least was not so cynical that he started by looking for a prankster in the balcony. His error may have been, however, in not seeing the Jesus who was there all the time, listening to the promise which Christ had already made. Where would we look for Jesus? Are we a little too much like Eli?

We hope and pray that we don’t get the Eli treatment here. The optional part of the text contains a rather frightening prophesy against the family of the old man. His sons were indeed scoundrels, using their position as the priest’s sons to secure financial and sexual favors from the worshipping Israelites. But the last part of the Word from God is especially troubling, it won’t ever be atoned. The children of Eli were cursed to die young and leave weeping orphaned children. They actually show up that way several times as the history of Israel unfolds in the succeeding centuries. It seems that whenever one of them tried to do anything, it always came down on their head. It was a descendent of Eli who helped David when he was running away from Saul and whose family was wiped out except for one young man who sought refuge with David’s band of rogues. It was a descendent of Eli who backed the wrong guy when Solomon ascended to the throne. Finally Solomon got so fed up with the group he banished them to a little town in Judea, Anathoth. From there, the most famous son of Eli would come, the prophet Jeremiah, the weeping prophet who served God but paid a heavy price, a foreshadowing of the Christ.

Eli’s resigned acceptance of the Word of the Lord is a virtue of sorts. We have all seen the situation where an old man would have been affronted by this child, punished him. But Eli listens and in a frighten way that makes this the more terrible. Eli is not a monster. He is an old man who is trying to do the right thing but has frequently failed. That sounds a lot like me. One feels for the old guy and wishes that the story could have come out another way for him. But does this not also make the judgment pronounced against this nice old guy fall that much closer to me? His sons were killed in a battle, just as the wife of one of them went into labor and died. Eli took the news so hard that he fell over backward and broke his neck. The grandson was to be named Ichabod, which would seem like a curse all by itself. The name means “The glory of the Lord has left.”

The word of the Lord was rare – this seemed to us to be a great access point to people in our generation. But was the problem really a rarity of the word or was the problem that they were not listening, Samuel did not recognize it and Eli, the high priest, did not recognize the voice of God. But God was and is persistent. He kept coming to Samuel.

Jesus told the parable of the wicked tenants of the vineyard who first abused, and finally drove and killed all the servants of the owner. So he finally sent his son to collect the rent. Of course they killed him in an insanely illogical attempt to gain the inheritance. Of course, in the strange upside down world of God, it works. Those who cruelly kill Jesus, the Son, end up working the very salvation and life of the world.

God is persistent. Even the death of Jesus did not close off his heart to this rebellious world. In truth, it opened it, for that was what he had in mind to do all along. He would not be deterred from his mission to save us, even killing him worked into his plan.

Psalm 139:1-10

O LORD, you have searched me and known me!

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.

³ You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.

⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high; I cannot attain it.

⁷ Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,"

¹² even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day,
for darkness is as light with you.

¹³ *For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.*
¹⁴ *I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.*
¹⁵ *My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*
¹⁶ *Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.*

I have included more of the whole Psalm here, it is really a great one and the decision to chop it off after ten verses seems a little arbitrary.

This psalm is written as comfort but could certainly be a very frightening word for a hearer. God is constantly hemming in the psalmist and presumably us as well. But the Psalmist looks for the Lord to hold him and lead him. The presence of God is a blessing, not an occasion for fear or at least not only for fear.

Eli, however, had seemed distant from God, was that because God had left or was it because Eli was dense. The psalmist perceives the presence of God everywhere, even in some rather out of the way spots.

Of course verses 13-16 are very important to the Pro-Life movement and worthily so.

I Corinthians 6:12-20

¹² “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be dominated by anything. ¹³ “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food”—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴ And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. ¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two will become one flesh.” ¹⁷ But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. ¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. ¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Remember that the Epistle lessons are not chosen to correspond to the Gospel lessons in these green seasons. We pick up a semi-continuous reading of Paul's letter to the Corinthians we left off just before Transfiguration in series A. Don't expect anyone else to remember that either.

Paul, on his way to Ephesus on the third missionary journey, which was really a fund raising trip, received at least two communications from the church in Corinth. He appears to have dashed off an initial letter which is lost to us (see I Cor 5:9). A group from Cloe's house then meets him, probably in Ephesus, with a list of issues for which they want answers. Many of these revolve around sexuality and ethics. It appears that the church in Corinth was profoundly troubled by eschatological issues. They thought the end of the world was imminent and were acting accordingly. Women were not having sex with their husbands because they thought they should not in light of the fact the time was short. What if Jesus showed up and we were in the act!? At the same time, it appears that others were getting in as much sinning as possible, some patronizing the many prostitutes in the city. Others descended into other forms of libertine behaviors. Still others were taking their fellow Christians to court.

Paul has a real mess on his hands and the letter we have as first Corinthians, probably the second letter he had sent to this congregation, is his attempt to solve the problem. Paul's basic thesis for the whole letter is stated in chapter 15. He thinks they have their theology of the resurrection messed up and that is creating most of the problems they are experiencing. It appears that some think the resurrection is purely a spiritual event and not a physical event. Others have suggested that it will not happen at all, and still others that it has already happened in baptism and that is all there is.

Paul has some serious work here to do and this passage is part of it. Notice the resurrection connection in all this. Their bodies are not their own. They will be raised again. What they do with them now is important and what they will become is glorious.

The motivations for the good deeds are really important here. Notice that Paul appeals to the reality of what has been done and the vision of what God will yet do. Both of them lead to virtuous and healthy behavior sets right now.

If you are thinking of the Epistle lessons for the season, you really need a good commentary on these. Does anyone have a good suggestion? The relatively recent Concordia Commentary series has a treatment of I Corinthians. Does anyone know of another?

John 1:43-51

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me."

⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and

said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!”⁴⁸ Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.”⁴⁹ Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”⁵⁰ Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.”⁵¹ And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

¹ *On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee,...*

Enjoy your little taste of John today. For the rest of the Sundays numbered after Epiphany the Gospel readings are all taken from the first chapter of Mark.

“The next day...” this is one of a series of events recounted in John’s first and second chapter. Traditionally, in the one year lectionary, this Sunday was always dedicated to the wedding at Cana. The editors of the current lectionary have striven to preserve that sense, but expanded the readings in the three year lectionary by giving us the lead up to the line, “on the third day there was a wedding.”

One does not have to be a genius, however, to read this and realize we have a bit of a problem if we want to read this straight up. The first day is apparently the day that John sees Jesus and declares him to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Then there are several of these “next day” sequences and the whole series ends with “On the third day there was a wedding feast.”

Of course, one could simply assume that primitive fishermen from Galilee were not terribly good at counting, but I bet successful fishermen could count, so that doesn’t sound terribly plausible. One could go through the mental gymnastics of suggesting that the wedding did indeed fall on the third day and that John is simply doing all this out of sequence, but that seems contrived to me.

So how does one read this first line, this contextualizing line of this? I have argued for some time that this is actually an intentional and theological point which John is making here. I think he is deliberately foreshadowing the passion narrative. On the first day the Baptist calls Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. A lamb was a sacrificial animal, especially in the removal of sins. That sounds like Good Friday to me. The third day on which there was a wedding feast sure sounds like an Easter reference to me.

So these “next days” which fall between are really repetitions of Holy Saturday. Now we know that the early church, we don’t know quite how early, developed the practice of gathering folks in baptism on Holy Saturday at the Easter Vigil. I don’t know if this was happening in the last decade of the first century when John wrote. But what is intriguing is that on all of these “next days” Jesus is gathering disciples, and this “next day” is no exception to that rule.

Jesus finds Philip and bids him follow. Philip immediately goes out and finds Nathaniel and asks him “could this be the one?” That tells you that Philip and Nathaniel were both waiting for the “one” doesn’t it? I think the preacher could do well to note that the command to follow Jesus was answered by going and finding someone and bringing them to Christ. There is a really important evangelism theme in this.

Nathaniel is cynical. Can anything good come from Nazareth, he wonders? In truth, we have dug up a little of the village of Nazareth and it was not much. The houses were poor and there was no city square, no public building of any kind, just a collection of small homes built up against the sides of the hills. It appears this was a community of the very poor. Jesus was not middle class. There is a good chance that his father was a construction worker at the rebuilding project for the larger city some miles away. It is likely that Jesus would have joined his father in that. He probably had something in common with the guys who are standing on certain street corners on most mornings looking for some work in a field, on a construction project, day labor. Jesus knows the challenge of that life because he has lived it. When Nathaniel wonders if anything good can come from Nazareth, it is a little like looking at the trailer parks and low-income housing of our cities and wondering if any good comes from there, or only problems.

Jesus declares Nathaniel to be a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit. How do you read Nathaniel’s words? Is it genuine wonder? Was it the cynicism of a man who knew his own sins well? Jesus goes on to surprise the man with his knowledge and Nathaniel is impressed, calling him the Son of God, the King of Israel. That is a pretty remarkably and speedy reversal, from cynic to ardent follower. Jesus assures him that he will see greater things than this. He will see the very sign of the ages, the one Daniel foresaw in his visionary book. We know from the Qumran community and elsewhere that this picture drawn from the prophet Daniel was potent in the first century Jewish community. In fact, at Jesus trial they will all consent to kill him when he lays claim to this very prophecy.

Jesus is revealed today by his knowledge and his creative word. He calls and men follow him. How will we reveal him in our preaching? What epiphany will our hearers experience?

Some years ago we thought to develop the evangelism/missions potential of this text.

- 1. Jesus said to Philip “follow me” but Philip runs off and finds another, Nathaniel. Is running off to find another really the way we follow?*
- 2. Philip is met with cynicism on the part of his friend. His response is not to try to and convince him, but to simply say. “He is the one, come and see.” Herein lies the real task of evangelism which we often get tragically wrong. We do not invite folks to a worship of some distant God, but the Jesus who is present in his people and in his world. Jesus’ kingdom is present, and where the kingdom is present, the king is also found.*
- 3. Nathaniel is a cynic, the detached modern who sits in his arm chair, remote in hand, who cannot be bothered, because he is bored. But his cynicism is conquered, not by Philip,*

but by Jesus. He comes to see and what he sees changes him. He confesses Christ. Jesus now is the one who urges him to take another look, but Nathaniel is in. He believes.

Law

1. The word of the Lord seems rare to us. We are awash in Bibles but they are largely unread. We are surrounded by the Word of God and yet God seems so distant from us. When a man stands up and claims to be a prophet, the wise Christian puts his hand firmly on his wallet because he is pretty sure that is where the guy will be heading soon. It is a cynical age in which we live.
2. God has good reason to be rare around these parts. The Church must ask itself if it has not played the Eli part here. Our children have drunk deep of their parents rationalism and skepticism and now they are nowhere to be found on a Sunday morning, at least not in a church building, or if it is it probably isn't a Lutheran building.
3. Even worse, God might not be absent, but we might just have our eyes closed to see him. What if he really is down at the mega-church on the edge of town or blowing through the Pentecostals with their upraised hands and over-the-top emotionalism? What if we really are the "frozen chosen" whom the Spirit has abandoned to our bickering and dying institutions? If God is the great gatherer of people, are we obviously missing something here?
4. Could the "come and see" of Philip actually pierce our hardened shells or would we simply roll over and remain under our fig tree, unwilling to venture out lest we be disappointed again?
5. If we did, would Jesus say of us that we are true Israelites in whom there is no deceit? What if that is not what he saw? What if he saw something much darker?

Gospel

1. The Word of God breaks into our lives, even as it is doing in the preaching of this sermon, as it does in the sacrament of which we partake. While our eyes might be closed sometimes in sin, God pries them open. His word will not return empty and his love will not be silent. Today millions of people are fed by the hands of Christians. Today, the Gospel is preached around the world, including this little corner of his mighty kingdom. As of today, roughly one third of the world's population somehow confesses to be a Christian. Can we really take a step back and look up from own problems and not see God at work?
2. Our sins may be real, but God's love is always more real. Even Jeremiah found that out, despite his curse and his lineage. God bids us today to turn our eyes from the past to the future of his promise and hope in him. He has forgiven the past.
3. Our doubts about ministry can be real questions about effectiveness and that is a good thing. God has given us a brain to use and there might be better ways of doing things. But

the measure of God's success is not always in the number of cars turning into our parking lots. The measure of God is the measurement of the kingdom: the child served, the love given, and the word bestowed. One has to remember there have been many times when the church was remnant. There were many days such as those of the prophets when people turned a deaf ear to faithful preaching. We must ask the question, but the answers are not always found in the measure of our offerings or the fullness of our pews.

4. God cracks the tough nuts. The church has known that since the days of Saul's great conversion. The man on the way to Damascus would have found these words in Corinthians unfathomable and he would have sneered at them as foolishness. But not now. God has changed him. Likewise God this day works his work in our midst. Perhaps our eyes have grown dim through familiarity, but that makes God's miracle no less miraculous. Sins are forgiven in this place, lives are changed, the lost are found, life is given; the soul starving for God is fed.
5. God can say about all of us that we are true Christians, true Israelites, not on our merit but on the merit of Christ's work for us. That was the same innocence that Jesus saw in Nathaniel and God continues to see it in us. That is the promise of taking that wafer inside us. It is the very innocence of God coming inside of us.

Sermon Ideas

1. "You Will See Greater Things than This." (Gospel: That the Spirit of God would open the eyes of the hearer to see that He continues to work through His church, and that despite its sin.)

This is the anti-cynicism sermon. Jesus would actually repeat this promise he made to Nathaniel, but in an even stronger form than he said to Nathaniel. In 5:20 Jesus promises that He will do greater works, but then in 14:12 Jesus says that the one who believes in him will not only see but also do even greater works than Jesus. It is one thing to see something great, it is quite another to do it. When Nathaniel followed Jesus he saw mighty acts of Jesus' power. He saw the multitudes fed, the dead raised, the demons cast out and the sick healed, just to start. Not all the miracles were pleasant to see. He would stand at a distance and watch the Lamb of God take away the sins of the world. Some of them frightened him. I wonder if he liked being in the boat when Jesus walked on the water. I wonder if he was terrified when Jesus showed up in that upper room on the first Easter.

We too are given to see the presence of Christ today. He is still doing his great work. Sinners around the world are hearing his name proclaimed and their sins forgiven. The sick are received in Christian hospitals and people are educated in Christian schools. The hungry are fed, by far many more than Jesus did when he fed the multitudes with five loaves and two fish. No, the world will not look at this and call it a miracle, but that makes it no less of a miracle. The people at Jesus time also groused when healed on the

Sabbath and when he did not do what they wanted. To the faithful he gives eyes to see this differently, the eyes which he gives to you today. Nathaniel did not expect much when he followed Philip to see this preacher from Nazareth. His expectations were far too low. But Jesus did not meet those expectations, he far surpassed them and Nathaniel's eyes were opened to see. So too, Christ comes today to open your eyes to see this Jesus at work, this king of the world, this Lamb of God, this Son of God, at work, in your little act of kindness this day, in your offering, in your worship, in your service as the hands and the feet of Christ for this world.

Here would be a good moment to have some ministry to point to which is right there in front of you. Are you collecting food for the hungry? Do you support the local pregnancy shelter, or do your women in the congregation make blankets for world relief. Point to those things and notice the presence of Christ in them. The world calls this a nice thing for people to do. We call it a work of Christ.

2. He followed Jesus by going away (Gospel – that the Spirit of God would empower the people of this congregation to be an invitation to see Jesus)

Jesus finds Philip and calls him to follow, but Philip doesn't attach himself to Jesus' hip and walk his shadow every day. He goes and finds his friend Nathaniel. But this is not some idealized moment in which Philip's invitation is gladly and eagerly heard. Nathaniel is cynical and jaded about this. Herein lies the connection to us today.

We want to notice in this several things that Philip does and which could guide us now.

- a. Philip does not try to convince Nathaniel through argument but simply urges Nathaniel to come and see for himself.
- b. Philip couches this as a question. Could this be the one for whom we are waiting? He doesn't have an answer, he has a question. This allows his friend to come to the conclusion himself.
- c. Philip does not upbraid his friend for his cynicism. Nazareth is indeed a backwater. The person who cynically wonders if anything good can come from Christianity has good reasons for his cynicism.
- d. Philip does ask his friend to see what he has seen. The invitation is not to some distant or remote God, nor it is to a historic past, but it is to someone who is right there and accessible. The Christian needs to be able to point out something to see for this to work. Is this good thing happening not the work of God? Is this preschool, this shelter, this community, this joy, this something... is it not the work of Christ?
- e. Nathaniel's mind and heart are changed, not by Philip but by the encounter with Christ. We too often take to ourselves the responsibility for making the disciples. We are tasked to go and invite, but it is always Jesus who makes the disciple. Not me.

The preacher will want to cast the role of the individual members as an evangelist, but he may not want to use the term. It is just so laden with negatives for so many folks. It may be that we need to reclaim the term, but we may simply want to say that Jesus has made us all his living invitations or something like that.

3. Come and See! (OT and Gospel: That the Spirit of God would call the hearer of this sermon to renewed hope in Christ and to the life to which to which He has called him/her.)

We see a couple of real winners in today's readings. Eli the old man whose sons have run amok and who cannot even really get it right with this child entrusted to his old age. Samuel lives in the temple and he still doesn't know the Lord. Surely Eli should have told him. In the Gospel reading we see Nathaniel, lounging and brooding under his fig tree, ready to flip his skeptical answer right back at his friend Philip. An old guy who has failed his kids. A young but jaded man who sees little to be excited about. Most of us probably find ourselves, at least at times, somewhere on the journey between those two positions.

What does God have for us? The consequences of Eli's judgment would give us the prophet Jeremiah and Nathaniel would become one of the witnesses of the resurrection. God often works with some interesting characters. Just look at Saul who will become Paul! What does God have in mind for us? He continues to take crusty and cynical people and work his work both on them and through them. His promise is that no matter where you find yourself on that scale between Nathaniel and Eli, He has a place for you in His kingdom.

Do not despair because you are having a hard time with this. He is the one who will act first and forcefully in all this. And first, like he did for Eli and Nathaniel, he will open your eyes and ears to perceive him. This Epiphany is about revealing Christ to people, even to you. Jesus is afoot, you see, and the whole world changes on that account. Sin has become sin forgiven. The scoundrels might just be changed, the Scrooges of the world can have a change of heart, you see. It is not just a Dickensian mythology. He might even crack your cynicism and blindness. There is hope you see, for God has declared it to be so.

And the life which is lived in light of that reality really is empowered to be different. No, not every day will be rosy. They were not for Samuel, for Eli, or for Nathaniel. But the problems now God's problems too, the successes were moments to glory in his great work, the failures become moments when the cross of Christ shone brightly, and every night they could go to bed assured that God loved them, nothing could change that.

4. And the Lord came and stood...for you too (OT and Gospel: That the Spirit of God would renew the call first issued to the hearer in baptism, repeated in the supper, reiterated in the Word today.)

This sermon is addressed to the tired Christians, at this point worn out from the holidays, feeling tapped out because the credit card bills are starting to show up in the mail from the Christmas excess, and the crowds of Christmas Eve are not here today. They may simply be feeling hopeless for a number of reasons, not included in the list above. It seeks to give that person hope and joy in being the man or woman whom God has called and commissioned to Christian life and whom God supports with his loving presence.

God physically presented himself to Samuel that day and made him into a prophet, mighty and powerful. He would be the greatest prophet since Moses, once more uniting both the prophetic, priestly and kingly offices. God has likewise come and called us, each of us, individually and when we have closed our ears or turned to the wrong way, he keeps coming back and calling us again and again. He wants to talk to you. He has spoken to you, and he continues to affirm that call he has made to each of you individually. We baptize one at a time. Our worshipful cry today, is Samuel's "Here I am, Lord. Speak, your servant is listening." Our sin has not erected a barrier which presents a problem to him. He has come into the flesh and broken down that barrier with the battering ram of a cross.

Samuel was a child, he did not recognize God. Are we all like children in this respect? We must be taught to recognize him. Samuel probably felt totally inadequate to his task on the day he opened the doors of the temple. The voice of the Lord does not make his life easier. Sometimes it takes courage to speak the word of God to a corrupt generation. I cannot tell you that it will be easy.

Many of us can identify with old Eli today, that we have too often been blind and deaf to the mighty deeds of God and his voice. Eli seems to be taking the things of God for granted. He is not tuned in, he is sitting in that temple, but he is not attuned to God's word. That has borne terrible fruit in our lives too. There is a good chance that we are much lonelier than we ever thought we would be today. Like Eli, we have seen our children run off into other places, some of those places are not so good, and we are sitting here today without them. And we deeply regret the mistakes we have made with them and we feel that it is somehow our fault, and it may well be. But that doesn't matter, the parent's heart is broken. But there is one sort of loneliness which we do not have to face. God is not absent from us.

Despite our deafness, he keeps coming, calling and calling. This is so even for Eli, whose cursed family would eventually produce the great prophet Jeremiah, from that house banished to Anathoth by Solomon. God came and stood among them again. They would labor for generations under this terrible curse, but their sacrifices were still the priestly sacrifices. Eventually their curse would become, in a Christ-like way, the very instrument of God's gracious word to his people. We often can only see endings in the affairs of our families and our world. But God does not see endings, he sees beginnings and potential.

The Gospel reading from John can be an illustration of the sorts of things that might make us blind/deaf to God like Eli. Are we cynically looking at our preacher and one another today, wondering if any good can come out of this place? Does our past experience sufficiently nurture a skepticism that keeps us from Samuel's "Here I am!"? God keeps calling, though, Philip repeats the request, "Come and see." This is all he says, Jesus does the rest. Samuel's mission is scary, he is terrified. Only the personal call from God gives him the ability to do that, that and a little prodding from Eli. But in the old man we see too the grace of God at work.

We may be able to point to many problems in our midst. Our congregation has undoubtedly done some things wrong, failed in many ways. We are damaged and broken people for so many reasons. But one promise is always kept. God promised to stand by you, even to the end of the world. He is keeping that promise even right now. No matter how old and frail, no matter how young and inexperienced, no matter what a mess you have made of things, God still has place and purpose for you in His kingdom.

Revelation also has a picture of Jesus knocking at the door of a congregation.

5. And God called "Samuel!" (OT That the Lord would remove from the hearer the burden of failure.)

Many of our people are looking down the pew and seeing that their children are not there. They are not in any church anywhere. And they feel tremendous guilt about that. They feel that they have failed. This could expand to include not just our own children but the whole congregation. We are getting older. Where are the children?

This sermon would offer them comfort and peace. Eli was a failure as a parent, indeed, all of us have to admit that we have not been ideal parents all the time. We have often failed our children. It is true. We have not always been the best moral examples, they did not learn fervent prayer or every good spiritual discipline from us. The sermon will not sugar coat that. We don't give people the excuse that we are off the hook here. We have failed, and if it was up to us, this would be hopeless.

But the sermon will also upbraid us for taking to ourselves God's job. The third article of the creed could be helpful here. The Holy Spirit is the one who calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies, and **keeps** in the one true Christian faith.

Eli did not see that with his sons, but he did with this little boy Samuel. God stood there calling him. Three times it appears Samuel ran right by God. But God did not let Eli's failures stop him. He kept calling and eventually the boy heard.

God has never forgotten the baptismal promises he has made to our children. Despite our failures he is still calling them. Perhaps it will not be today, and perhaps I will be part of that call today. But make no mistake – God is keeping his promise to watch their coming in and their going out for all time. (Ps 121)

6. God who governs all things in heaven and earth – (Epistle That the hearer would count on the Sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit)

Paul's letter to the Corinthians really exposes our hypocrisy. We like to point to all the evil in the world and wonder where God is in all this, but we look conveniently right past our own failings and our own vices. How many pastors are not addicted to pornography.

Paul proclaims that we are temples of the Holy Spirit and such a life is simply a contradiction of that. But he also proclaims us to be temples of the Holy Spirit. Our sin does not make the Spirit less holy, Rather the Holy Spirit renders the sinner holy.

The collect from a couple of weeks ago was good. The Lord poured his Holy Spirit on us. Not a drop or two, but a waterfall of God's light and Spirit.