

## **Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, February 4**

The Sundays of Epiphany reveal the Christ hidden in the manger. Today we see Christ revealed as the Son of God in his love for people, all of them. But for the people of God today, there is a strong and important message which runs underneath this. The OT lesson speaks of how we see the world and the weariness which we feel. The Epistle lesson speaks of how Paul sees himself and the boundless energy which he has for preaching the Gospel, becoming all things for all people. Change takes a great deal of effort, but Paul does not count that expenditure. The Gospel lesson has a weary Jesus seeking out more opportunity, not less. The truth is that if we are not there, we are out of step with this Jesus. In so far as this is not a description of us, we have a problem. In so far as Christ's love is not revealed in our lives, Christ remains hidden, unrevealed, Epiphany thwarted.

And let's face it, this is our problem. For many of us, our congregations are filled with weary and grizzled Christian warriors. They are there in many instances because forty or fifty years ago they were part of something which really excited them and they have been operating on the inertia of those glory days. They are tired and don't see why what was so good was not sustainable. They are often hanging on desperately to something which they remember with great joy from their younger days. But as they look out over their congregation today they are not filled with hope and joy as they once were. They are tired and there does not seem to be anyone who will pick up the job when they check out for the last time. The mobility of our society means that their children are in another state, perhaps practicing their Christianity in another church, perhaps not. Their own parish has not captured the young people from other communities who have moved into town, if there are any. There is little joy, there is little hope.

A wise friend of mine once said that his definition of heaven was when the difference between what we have to do and what we want to do goes away. In other words, the things we have to do become always the things we want to do. If you know someone who really loves getting up in the morning and going to work, you might know a little jealousy of that person. If you are such a person, Solomon himself calls you blessed.

How do we make church, our service to Christ, our Christian labor into something which is a joy to us? How do we get that energy of which Isaiah wrote? How do we sound a little more like Paul? How do we follow Jesus willingly over that next hill to that next village filled with cripples, lepers, sinful tax collectors and prostitutes? How do we get some of that eagerness, energy and joy, especially when we have grown so used to seeing our service in the kingdom as filling constitutionally mandated church offices and grinding out the required chores of congregational life? How do we get excited to see Jesus this week? How do we have some joy again?

Some of it is indeed the very sort of common sense ideas that abound in the manuals and books which are written for congregational leaders. Meaningless church offices and structures which don't really function need to be scrapped and we need to rethink some of this. These things suck

the joy out of ministry for preachers and people alike. But it is also important to remember that bylaws and constitutions are not really meant to be broken. They are there so that people are not broken – they protect us more than they burden us. Our fellowship needs to be loving, our spirituality and worship needs to be passionate and inspiring. Our outreach has to address real needs, etc., etc. But in truth, you can do all that stuff right and still not like it.

Today we get to proclaim something essential. The answer to this issue is not in our hands. God is the great giver of joy. He strengthens the weak and weary, giving the strength which surpasses that of the young man, the legs which run and do not weary, the perseverance which endures even the desert's heat. He is the great re-maker and re-shaper of hearts and minds, giving new vision, connecting us in Jesus to a love which transcends our understanding.

### **Collect of the Day**

O Lord, keep your family the Church continually in the true faith that, relying on the hope of Your heavenly grace, we may ever be defended by Your mighty power; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*Our Catechism taught us that the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies, and keeps the whole Christian Church on earth. The prayer seems to have us focusing on that “keep” today. There are a couple of things to ask about this. First what does that keeping entail? Does he do this via some inward prompting, does he use Synodical resolutions? Does he push with external things? My grandmother was convinced that the Great Depression was God’s way of shaping the faith of American Christians. Was she right? Did it work? Or did God work great things despite the affliction of the Great Depression?*

*Then we might want to ask about the character of the true faith? Lutherans have always understood this far too intellectually. We act as if we have all the catechism answers correct therefore we are in the true faith. Too often I have seen the catechized and confirmed Lutherans approach that altar with hearts seething with pride, hatred, jealousy, and other idolatries, but we turn away the poor non-member because he hasn’t had his Lutheran card punched. The fact of the matter is that over half of Hitler’s staff were members of the Lutheran Church. The BTK killer of a few years ago was chairman of his Lutheran congregation and could probably quote the catechism. There has to be something more than simply intellectual assent going on here. True faith is always a relationship with Christ. Is that relationship defined by intellectual propositions? Don’t get me wrong, I am a professor after all, I think the intellectual stuff is pretty important, but I believe we have distorted faith by imagining that we are somehow a thinking machine. It is not the case that our programming needs to be changed and then all will be well with us. We are embodied, emotional, and relational beings. We have to think of ourselves holistically.*

*The prayer goes to describe the true faith as reliance upon the hope God's heavenly grace. Is it Schleiermacher's absolute dependence? Walther would have a conniption if he heard me suggest it. Schleiermacher was an early 19<sup>th</sup> century theologian from Germany who was part of the Romantic Movement. He suggested that real Christianity was found in this feeling of dependence upon God. He thought it might be achieved without Christ, mind you. One theological historian has suggested that all modern protestant theologians are actually the children of Schleiermacher. If you ever hear someone speak of the importance of sincerity of faith or the like, you can draw a straight line of thought back to Schleiermacher. Is my statement in the prior paragraph about an overly intellectualized faith just another schleiermachian assertion?*

*This issue of true faith has bedeviled Christianity, especially American Christianity for a long time. It will require of us that we treat it with some care. The Bible is very concerned about the character and the quality of faith, but the whole question of "true" faith introduces some elements to the conversation which can lead into some troubling paths. Most importantly it asks that we look at our faith to determine whether it is true. That, all by itself, is problematic because it means we are taking our eyes off the Author and Perfector of our faith, and in so doing are in fact violating the truth of faith! The question itself can betray a lack of faith.*

*The prayer then beseeches God that, acting in faith, we are ever defended by God's mighty power. From what? By the time we get done with all the permutations and questions about our faith in the first part, we might think that we have found the enemy and he is us! In truth, many a Christian preacher has made a career of preaching about the enemy within. But I think that generations of Christians who have spoken these sorts of prayers in times of persecution would find that our questions are those of comfortable Christianity, not the lean and vigorous Church under persecution.*

## **Readings**

Isaiah 40:21-31

<sup>18</sup> *To whom then will you liken God,  
or what likeness compare with him?*

<sup>19</sup> *An idol! A craftsman casts it,  
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold  
and casts for it silver chains.*

<sup>20</sup> *He who is too impoverished for an offering  
chooses wood that will not rot;  
he seeks out a skillful craftsman  
to set up an idol that will not move.*

<sup>21</sup> *Do you not know? Do you not hear?  
Has it not been told you from the beginning?  
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?*

<sup>22</sup> It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,  
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;  
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,  
and spreads them like a tent to dwell in;  
<sup>23</sup> who brings princes to nothing,  
and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.

<sup>24</sup> Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,  
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,  
when he blows on them, and they wither,  
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

<sup>25</sup> To whom then will you compare me,  
that I should be like him? says the Holy One.

<sup>26</sup> Lift up your eyes on high and see:  
who created these?

He who brings out their host by number,  
calling them all by name,  
by the greatness of his might,  
and because he is strong in power  
not one is missing.

<sup>27</sup> Why do you say, O Jacob,  
and speak, O Israel,  
“My way is hidden from the LORD,  
and my right is disregarded by my God”?

<sup>28</sup> Have you not known? Have you not heard?  
The LORD is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary;  
his understanding is unsearchable.

<sup>29</sup> He gives power to the faint,  
and to him who has no might he increases strength.

<sup>30</sup> Even youths shall faint and be weary,  
and young men shall fall exhausted;

<sup>31</sup> but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;  
they shall run and not be weary;  
they shall walk and not faint.

*Isaiah's audience was asking about a situation which felt like God was absent. It felt like God was a long ways away. They had been through a political and military meat grinder as the*

*Assyrians and then Babylonians rampaged through their country. It felt like them God was not paying attention to their problem. What questions are our folks asking?*

- 1. Will our parish survive? Our numbers are shrinking. We feel angst about finances and the lack of people, especially the lack of people under the age of 40.*
- 2. Will our culture survive? It seems like others are taking over who do not know the piety, morality, and values which we hold dear.*
- 3. Will our denomination/Lutheranism survive? It seems like the non-denoms and others are succeeding while we are failing.*

*Isaiah's words are not what we expect. God does not offer to take away the problems, he offers to make the folks who are suffering stronger and more resilient.*

*The last portion of the text tells us that God does great things and he gives us strength. But the hard part about this is that if God is the one who is providing the solutions that means he also is the one who is in charge. We hate to relinquish control and cede that to God. We like to be the ones to tell God what to bless instead of pursuing the things which God is blessing.*

*I thought it important to see the few verses which precede this reading. Isaiah addresses these words to a situation of idolatry. Isaiah's depiction of this seems to be a bit of a caricature. Scholarship suggests that the Babylonians and the other pagans of the day were far more sophisticated than this suggests. They knew that stone and wooden idols were not the gods whom they worshipped, not really. Even that assessment of the Babylonians needs to be taken with a grain of salt, however. Scholars often forget that they know only the intellectual elites. We know almost nothing of what the laborer in the vast empires of Assyria and later Babylon actually thought and believed. Isaiah's words may well have rung very true for his Israelite readers who were rubbing shoulders with these people.*

*Isaiah, remember, writes to people that have been hammered. The Assyrians and Babylonians have waged unrelenting war against them for over a century and now their cities lie in ruins and their nation has been ravaged. These are not people who need to hear about from whom they need to be defended. They know it full well.*

*Their bigger question is what can be done about it. It would appear that Isaiah is either forestalling a set of questions here or answering them, depending on when you think Isaiah wrote this. We find it unfathomable, but the ancient would have had a number of very interesting questions which such an event would have prompted. The ancients seemed to conceive of their world as a reflection of heavenly events. Thus, if our armies lost a war to some foreign nation, it might be because their gods have defeated our god.*

*Isaiah begins this section of chapter 40 by hearing none of that. There is no other god. He sits enthroned above the heavens and all the peoples of the earth are like bugs before Him. In comparison, the mighty princes are but blades of grass which sprout and wither before the dry*

wind. Even the mighty prince who has conquered their land, the great names that have come down even to our time, Tiglath-Pileasar, Nebuchadnezzar, Sennacherib, they are but a blade of grass. Yet in most of the ancient world these men likened themselves to gods, demanding the worship of their peoples. They have won the war, the city lies in ruins, and perhaps they are gods. Isaiah will have none of this sort of talk. The God who stretched out the heavens and sets the stars in their galactic dance is so far greater than them that one cannot comprehend the distance. To whom will we compare Him?

But that then leads to the second question which is probably the greater question for the people of Judah. Not many of them would have seriously entertained the idea that God was defeated anyway. But the second question does seem to have troubled them because Ezekiel will wrestle with the same thing. It is not that God has been defeated, but perhaps he doesn't care. The affairs of the poor downtrodden Jews are too small for God to bother with. They have been forgotten. Or worse, God is angry and he has hidden his face from them, deliberately ignoring them. God doesn't want to care about them anymore. But, as Isaiah noted, the God who leads out the starry host, makes sure that not one is missing.

The Lord does not grow weary like men do. He never forgets to visit that shut in and never drops the ball on the gal in the hospital. He doesn't get tired, he doesn't get weary, and that stamina is applied to his gracious mercy and care for his downtrodden people. Just watch what God can do. Even young men get tired, but God will give strength to the weary and the faint. Those who hope in the Lord run and not grow tired, they walk and do not grow faint. They will renew their strength and rise up on eagle's wings.

For the preacher, this is a potent text. Many a congregation, especially congregations who are served by Deacons, feel like they are the forgotten stepchildren. They are not often written up in the District newsletters; they are often toiling along, and feel as though some are simply waiting for them to die. That is not how God sees them at all.

God is able to be present, fully present, for every one of the two billion people who are called Christian today. He never gets divided, it is not that you get 1 two billionth of God, you get the whole thing. He is always present with you, fully present. Remember he can quite literally make time to give you his full attention. Does that reality energize us?

Psalm 147:1-11

Praise the LORD!

For it is good to sing praises to our God;

for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting.

<sup>2</sup>The LORD builds up Jerusalem;

he gathers the outcasts of Israel.

<sup>3</sup>He heals the brokenhearted

and binds up their wounds.

- <sup>4</sup> He determines the number of the stars;  
he gives to all of them their names.
- <sup>5</sup> Great is our Lord, and abundant in power;  
his understanding is beyond measure.
- <sup>6</sup> The LORD lifts up the humble;  
he casts the wicked to the ground.
- <sup>7</sup> Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;  
make melody to our God on the lyre!
- <sup>8</sup> He covers the heavens with clouds;  
he prepares rain for the earth;  
he makes grass grow on the hills.
- <sup>9</sup> He gives to the beasts their food,  
and to the young ravens that cry.
- <sup>10</sup> His delight is not in the strength of the horse,  
nor his pleasure in the legs of a man,
- <sup>11</sup> but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,  
in those who hope in his steadfast love.

*If you have been paying attention to my words in the prior section on the Collect of the Day, you will notice that I am echoing some of the thoughts of this Psalm there. It is good to sing God's praises. Why is that good? Is it good for us? Undoubtedly. Is it morally right? The world has a hard time talking about any moral right these days. But it is morally proper, good, and right to sing God's praises. It is simply reflecting the reality of who he is and who I am. It is good to be real.*

*I would also have you notice the things for which we praise God, and how they are arranged in this psalm. The restoration of Jerusalem, the binding up of the broken hearted, the sorts of things we preach about regularly, the saving of people, is mingled in with what we might call divine providence. The stars are numbered and named, the ravens are fed, the clouds form, and the rains replenish the earth. God's delight is in all who fear him.*

*The implications for the preacher are expansive. Have we gotten our preaching too narrow? The world wants to say we can talk morals and "spiritual" things, but read the sermons of the patristics and the reformation era preachers. They were not speaking of a kingdom which impinged only on one's "spiritual" dimension but upon the whole of life. It is good for all creation to be engaged in the praise of God.*

*I think we have this psalm today because of verse 4 and the parallel with 26 of the Isaiah text. You get this picture of God knowing all the stars by name. If you want to really illustrate this point and you have a projector, go to the NASA website or the Hubble Telescope site and download one of those pictures with a field of stars closely packed together. It could be really*

*even more effective for us that in was for the folks in David's time to know that God has them all named, all of them are precious to him. It might make you and me feel a little less insignificant.*

*God cares for the whole of his creation. The cries of young ravens in the nest are prayers that he hears and answers as well. The Lord takes pleasure and delight in the people who fear and hope in him.*

#### I Corinthians 9:16-27

<sup>15</sup> *But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting.* <sup>16</sup> *For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!* <sup>17</sup> *For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship.* <sup>18</sup> *What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.*

<sup>19</sup> *For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.* <sup>20</sup> *To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.* <sup>21</sup> *To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.* <sup>22</sup> *To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.* <sup>23</sup> *I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*

<sup>24</sup> *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.* <sup>25</sup> *Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.* <sup>26</sup> *So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air.* <sup>27</sup> *But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.*

*Again, a little context is important. Paul is addressing some of the charges which have been laid particularly against him in chapter 9. It appears that some are attacking his character, accusing him of abusing his apostolic office for personal gain. Paul denies this in no uncertain terms in the first part of the letter and our reading is drawn from the section in which states more positively what his approach to his office really is. I think it is important to remember that this is a defense, what is technically known as an apology, but not in the "I am sorry" sense but in the sense of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession or Plato's "Apology" of Socrates. He is articulating who he is and why the charges laid against him are false.*

*Paul is working his way through the catalogue of problems at Corinth. We are ploughing through the book in the season of Epiphany and normally this would mean the Epistle reading is something of a disjuncture from the Gospel and Old Testament reading but today all three*

*readings come together beautifully. Paul is speaking of the heart of the preacher today, the heart of the person who is engaged in the mission of Christ's kingdom. Paul seems to be addressing the party or factional spirit which has infected the congregation. Some of them are saying that they are more spiritual or more Christian than others. Paul will hear none of this. His very apostleship, the highest of callings, is a trust, a stewardship of a gift. Paul presents his preaching free of charge, without a cost, not for some personal gain but wholly as an act of Love.*

*Paul has become the servant of all, to the Jew he will be a Jew, to the Gentile, he will be a Gentile, so that he might win some for Christ. He has become all things, losing himself and gaining Christ. He would share with anyone and everyone the blessings of the Gospel. The group Clowns for Christ has made this something of a theme verse for their organization. They are willing to become fools for the Gospel. I think that any organization needs to somehow keep that spirit and yet also ask important questions about how effective such a ministry is and what will be the long term ramifications of this or that ministry. To be anything for the sake of Gospel is laudable, but it still demands that we think about what we would be and how that will further the kingdom goals.*

*Then he picks up his famous running metaphor. Many have thought that Paul must have been an athlete in his younger days. We don't know that, but it could have been, growing up in Tarsus, that a speedy young Jewish boy had participated in the local games. Paul disciplines himself, keeping his flesh under control so that he should not preach/compete and be disqualified. You won't find any illegal, performance enhancing drugs here. This is the athlete who has trained and won the prize legitimately. What would that performance enhancing, cheating be for a preacher I wonder? Fortunately, reading sermon notes from professors is within the rules.*

*The Christian is running a race, training like a boxer, with a purpose and a goal in mind. This is not some meaningless exercise. I think that is why so many disengage from the processes of the kingdom and the work of spreading the good news. They lose sight of the end and they don't see why they should do it. It becomes another of the silly drills which our football coach used to make us do because some successful college team had used it. But without it being integrated into a whole coaching scheme, it was just another silly drill. Friendship Sundays and delivering freshly baked bread for guests will be very similar if we are not careful about articulating the goal, the love of Christ for that person.*

*With that love articulated, however, be prepared for something really powerful to happen. People serving God and plugged into that love find that they can sometimes do amazing things, which they never thought possible. The preacher needs to be ready for that. Paul was pretty impressive in what that presence of Christ accomplished in his life. It won't be controlled by you, nor will it necessarily result in the growth of your institution, but it will serve the kingdom of Christ.*

*Paul seems to be the guy whom we imagined in the OT lesson, the one for whom God is calling the shots, directing the life. Paul's whole life has been subordinated to God's mission to bring*

*the love of Christ to people. If it serves that end, Paul will do it. He has a compulsion to do that. He says he doesn't see that as a choice. It is not his will at work there. Is this the answer for the congregation which is wondering about its survival? Do we need to get them to ask a different question set? They are worried about the institution, Paul is pushing Christ to the world. Do we need to forget our own survival and ask what pushes Christ into this world? I think so.*

Mark 1:29-39

<sup>29</sup> And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. <sup>30</sup> Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. <sup>31</sup> And he came and took her by the hand and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

<sup>32</sup> That evening at sundown they brought to him all who were sick or oppressed by demons. <sup>33</sup> And the whole city was gathered together at the door. <sup>34</sup> And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

<sup>35</sup> And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed. <sup>36</sup> And Simon and those who were with him searched for him, <sup>37</sup> and they found him and said to him, "Everyone is looking for you." <sup>38</sup> And he said to them, "Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out." <sup>39</sup> And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

*And they came into Peter's home and Jesus healed his mother-in-law. All the bad jokes about mothers-in-law aside, this actually is quite important. Peter is in the same need as everyone else. His family gets sick too. It is not the case that the folks who are close to Jesus need something different than the rest of the people. They need the same sort of salvation that the blind and lame and lepers need. It takes the healing hand of Jesus to make a servant.*

*Jesus is rapidly becoming a movement. People are flocking to Jesus and bringing their woes and problems to him. If you know the pain of having a member of your family disabled or worse demonically possessed, you know how eager these crowds must have been. Driven by love for their family members, they would not let Jesus get any rest. They come to the house where he is staying all day and evening. Jesus will not let the demons speak. The one he met earlier in the day spoke and identified him, but Jesus forbids these. Their testimony is not what he came to hear. He would that men confess his name.*

*But it is the last paragraph to which the preacher will likely turn his attention today. Jesus gets up early, before anyone else in the house, and he goes off to a solitary place. You can almost feel his need to be alone. I once heard an old preacher say that after a whole morning of services and visiting folks in the hospital all afternoon, the last thing he wanted to see on a Sunday evening was another Christian. The disciples seek him out and urge him back, but he has his eyes cast*

*somewhere along the road, over the hill, into the next valley. “Let us go to the next towns, that I may preacher there also, for that is why I came out.” And he does it. And he drags along this motley crew of fishermen with him.*

*There is a longing within the heart of Jesus that will not be content with the folks he has gathered in this place today. He is glad they are there; he is glad that their sins are forgiven and their pain has been eased, but he casts his eye to the person outside and he would reach to them too. Now, it doesn't take much application at this point to see that most of the congregations I have been a part of struggle to have this feeling. I would guess your parish has the same struggle. There seems to be something inherent within congregations which takes care of itself, and turns its eyes inward. We love the people who are there, and that is a great thing. We enjoy our time together and that is even essential. But plan an evangelism outing or a potluck and compare how many folks show up. We will happily show up with a casserole or a pot of soup so share with friends. Showing up with the joy of Jesus to share with a stranger is a little harder for us.*

*In one sense this is good and normal, but in another it really reflects that we are in some ways terribly out of step with our Lord. We have always been the Church of the Lutheran Roundup. Evangelism has often been understood among us as simply gathering the Lutherans in this place or that. For its early years, the LCMS understood domestic missions as sending missionaries into communities to find the Germans, see that they were not Catholics, and then start a congregation. We might send that preacher past twenty other communities with just as many people, but his task was to find the Lutherans. If the town was a bunch of Irishmen, he went on to the Germans down the highway. That is a little harsh. It was not always that way. The Lutherans in America have a long and beautiful history of educating and reaching out to African Americans – Concordia in Selma AL is a vestige of that great work of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Just down the road from my home parish was a community of Lutherans who had been an almost equally split German and African American community since the early days of reconstruction when slaves fled their old masters and found a welcome in the German enclave. There are good stories to tell as well.*

*That said, is it any wonder that we struggle with mission today? The boats are no longer disgorging whole communities of emigrants from northern Germany. The planes today are landing with their human influx from Asia and Latin America and Africa. These are not fellow Lutherans whose churches we can organize for them. Some are Catholics, many are Hindus, Moslems, and Buddhists. There are strong currents in our congregations which loathe them for political and other less savory reasons. Yet, these are all the children of God for whom Jesus died.*

*Just because they are not coming from the same place as we did does not mean we cannot reach them. But what that outreach takes is heart, a heart which rejoices to see another Christian*

*made, a heart which rejoices to share the good news of Jesus with people, a heart which loves with the love of Christ for all people, no matter which village they hail from or which continent.*

*How does one get that heart? How does one follow Jesus down that road out of our own version of Capernaum, our home towns, to the valleys and the communities of "them?" The Christian will first and foremost need let that be a divine action. God makes hearts, not me, not the preacher, not the person. There is no program I can initiate in a congregation which gives that heart. I think it is an error that we don't actually get the next verses of the gospel. I think they are essential to the logical flow of the text.*

*<sup>40</sup> And a leper came to him, imploring him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." <sup>41</sup>Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I will; be clean." <sup>42</sup>And immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean.*

*Jesus has said that he has come for others and the first one who shows up is none other than the most loathsome and fearsome of all, a leper, a carrier of a dreadful and contagious disease. In a recent edition of the National Geographic there was an article about the grass roots health work of some women in India as they worked among lepers. It is really an inspiring story but also graphically underscores just what an outcast such people are in societies where they are still found. Jesus touches the man. The law said a leper must maintain a safe distance and cry out "unclean!" at the approach of anyone; even his own family could not touch the leper. Jesus reaches out and touches the man, breaking the social taboo and even an element of the Mosaic rules. He is willing, you see. His love drives him.*

*It is unlikely that we will experience the call of Father Damien at the leper colony in Hawaii, where he so willingly ministered to lepers that he contracted the disease himself. He served the members of the community by making their coffins for them. You can read a little article about him at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04615a.htm>. But we, if Christ changes our hearts, should not be surprised if he has us reaching out and touching some unlikely people. What will that look like in your community? I don't know, my guess is you don't either. St. John's Lutheran in urban Salt Lake City was a typical, declining city parish. One day a very tall and thin black man walked into the office of the Pastor, it was Tap, the man selected to be leader of a small Sudanese community of refugees in the city. He was selected only because he knew a little English. Would the Lutherans help? The other village came to St John Lutheran that day and to this day there is a thriving Sudanese ministry there.*

*Christ calls his people out of their comfort zones today and to see the world with his eyes and with his love for all people. That is not a comfortable nor easy transition to make. The preacher will need to remember that this is God's work, not the product of a harangue. The best way to change people's hearts is to lead them yourself and to encourage them and show them the blessing. Guilt is a terrible motivator. Its effects are very short term. But being excited about the call of God and the work of Jesus moves people to do amazing things.*

## **Law**

1. The mighty rolling spheres which NASA explores show that I am little more than a tiny mote in this vast universe.
2. Thus when the lie of my delusional self-importance is exposed as the foolishness it is, I am then tempted to fall off that horse on the other side. If I am not the center of the universe, then I am nobody, God doesn't care for me. This is especially tempting when my life is on one of its downward cycles, if the finances are troublesome, the health is failing, the family is collapsing, etc.
3. But even if I get the balance a little more right and I know that God loves me and even that he loves my fellow congregants and we are important to him, we still struggle with this. We either think that this is all about saving my church from declining membership or we come to the conclusion that we are failures and God doesn't care about our congregation.
4. The truth is that God's vision is impossibly large. His love is too big for my narrow little heart. I cannot see the world as he does. I am a bundle of self-interest, not the generous and outgoing person he calls me to be. It is hard enough to love the people under my own roof with me, harder still to get along with the stinkers at church. Now I am supposed to gin up love for the drug addicts, the foreigners, the unbeliever, and even my enemy?
5. I and my fellow congregants are weary. Now I am supposed to get out there any save the world too? I can barely find enough Sunday School teachers for the pitiable little program we are offering and now I am supposed to make it into something that reaches out into the community? How am I going to do that?

## **Gospel**

1. God knows every star, every mote of dust, every barren asteroid, every snowflake. His mind does not get overwhelmed like ours do when he considers the vast array of people and things in this universe. He can hold it all in his mind. He has you in mind right now and every moment of every day.
2. That mindfulness of God is framed and filled with the love of God in Christ. The incarnation means that he knows even more intimately the beating of your heart, the fear and the passion, the love and the weariness which is your life. You are doubly on his mind since that pivotal moment when Jesus walked the shores of Galilee. He has literally gotten under your skin and he likes it there.
3. Yes, the disciples did not have a clue about Jesus real mission and we are not that much better, but Jesus speaks to them and leads them forth from Capernaum. He gives them the

vision that moves them; they don't come up with this themselves. Our shortcomings of vision are not insurmountable to him. I cannot change myself, but he can and he does.

4. And that transformation goes even deeper than my mission, it goes all the way to my heart, to the center of my being. Jesus has not come to put a bandage on a much deeper problem, but he has come to save the world, and that includes me and you. His heart of love is given to us, wholly and fully. I cannot possibly love as he does, so he loves through me. This transformation turns me from the inward to the lovingly outward looking person that Jesus defines me to be.
5. What is more, this transformation of vision and heart gives me strength, gives me the energy. That might mean that I look at the Sunday School program very differently, remember it is his vision. I might start teaching the classes differently, moved not by some adherence to tradition but by his love. But that also means that when I start to see the world as he does, when I start to love with his love, I eagerly look forward to what I am doing, I love to be there.

### **Sermon Ideas**

1. "Let us go on to the next villages...for that is the reason I came" (Gospel - That the hearer be called and empowered by Christ's love and Spirit so that he/she would assess and re-vision life and parish as instruments for the Kingdom to come.)

This sermon is aiming toward the congregation which is inwardly focused and needs to remember that this congregation belongs to Jesus, he started St. Johns/Trinity/Redeemer (whatever your parish name is). This congregation is here to serve his purposes.

Today Jesus is revealed in his love for all people. Isaiah would have us remember that God is in control and his great love abounds. That God in the flesh today will not let the disciples stay at home and minister to the folks whom they know, with whom they are comfortable. The mission of Christ is to the whole world, at least to the next village where sin has crippled, maimed, killed, and broken just as many lives as it has here. It is the great temptation of Christians to be so impressed by the good work that God has done in his or her life and in his or her closest friends that they don't get past that. But there is a problem with such inwardly looking ministry. It is out of step with Christ and out of step with Christ it loses the strong energy and vitality which Christ brings to ministry and to faith itself. The preacher will want to have his people empathize a little with the disciples in this. They want Jesus to come home. It is not a bad thing to want. It is a normal and natural desire. It is not God's desire. His heart is larger than our natural hearts and he gives us that heart.

Christ did not call us in our baptism to serve ourselves, he did not establish this congregation to be a place where his people can meet and be chummy with their friends.

He called us in baptism and brought together into a congregation so that his light might shine in dark places, so that his love might be expressed to people who do not know it, so that sinners might be forgiven and the lonely might find a friend. This is not about saving an institution, it is about Christ being revealed. He will take care of the institution, that is his job. He can cause growth where you might least expect it, he can cause the desert itself to bloom. Our job and our joy are the same thing – they are Christ and his Kingdom. If we are about the business of saving this congregation from collapse and a slow death by funeral, we will fail. It doesn't work that way. The energy which has made Christianity a potent force in the world does not derive from buildings and constitutions, but from the Spirit of God saving lost people, through the very lost and found sorts of people he has gathered right here. Christ calls us today to stop fretting about our parish and our institution and to start praying for and working for his lost people. When we see them as he does, and when we would cheerfully close these doors if it would further his kingdom, then we are ready to see the amazing miracle he can work. I have every confidence that this parish is part of his plan for this town, but it is his plan and his salvation we preach, a salvation not of our church but of his people. And in loving with his love, the world gets to see Jesus.

2. To run and not grow weary, to walk and not be faint, to rise up on wings of an eagle. (OT/Epistle/Gospel - That the hearer would be a witness to the love of Christ, filled with vitality and joy for he/she is the child of God, united with the incarnate Christ.)

This sermon is aimed at the congregation which is perhaps discouraged or tired from service. They are wondering why they are coming to this place, why it is not working, why their beloved congregation is not growing or why it is shrinking.

Are you weary? Does the thought of doing something else at church make you blanch or roll your eyes? There is a funny thing that Christians do, they start to think that they have to do stuff, then they start to do it because no one else will do it, then pretty soon they are trudging up to the door, enduring something, then loathing it. But wait a minute. This could be very different. This could be exciting, this could be fun, this could be the highlight of your week! What does that take? I want some of that too? I want the energy of Paul. I want a little of that uplift on eagle's wings and that ability to run and not grow weary, to walk and not be faint. I would like to be different, wouldn't you?

This is not a secret, at least it should not be. The joy, energy and vitality of the Christian faith is located in Jesus and his love. When I am doing his work, when I am engaged in his kingdom, when I am the child of God, His Spirit fills me and I get to see the world through his eyes. It is easy to see the problems and forget that Jesus died for all those problems and to be excited at the prospect of seeing his solutions unfold both for us and through us. I am a forgiver of sins, the abundance of sin I encounter is simply job security for the likes of me. I have seen God unleash the power of forgiveness and love between

people who have been in conflict, and so I come to every fight eager to see what God can do with this one. The preacher really needs to have a story to illustrate this at this point. I can tell you my stories, but I cannot tell you your stories and they are so much better. Think about it, remember your life, your ministry. Be ready to tell a story about how God has stepped in and solved a problem.

There is no problem bigger than God's solution, there is no sinner bigger than God's forgiveness, there is no hurt whose tears he will not wash away. God has led out the starry host and calls them all by name, he has welcomed the children into his arms, and born the weight of this world's sin on the cross. If you cannot see Jesus at work in what you are doing at church, you probably need another job to do. Find the thing he is blessing and jump in with both feet. His joy will attend you and his Spirit will fill you and be, simply be, the Christian he has made you to be.

God is really interested in and will bless that sort of service. Trust him. He wants to help you. He wants your joy not your drudgery. He will make it work.

3. All things to All People, that Some Might Be Saved (Epistle – That the Holy Spirit would break the sinful prejudices within the congregation and unleash the potent love which God has for sinners.)

This sermon is aimed at the congregants who struggle with God's love for all, even the people they don't like. This is similar to the first sermon, but a little different. The first sermon is for the happy group of people who are focused on the good things happening in the midst but missing the larger picture. This sermon is really focused on the congregation which unhealthily imagines that they are somehow better or more acceptable to God than the "other." This sermon is aimed at a spiritual bigotry which manifests in congregations as isolationism, prejudice, and caricature of the "other" as something which you cannot understand and have no desire to understand.

Our exemplar here will be Paul himself and we will stand in some awe that Saul of Tarsus who persecuted the followers of the Way (Acts 9) became the fellow we read in this lesson. How did that happen? We will want to focus on just what this Saul of Tarsus was thinking about these Christians, these others. It will sound remarkably like the things we might hear in our congregations when the topic of homosexuality, illegal immigration, protesters in Ferguson, MO, or even just "Liberals" or "Democrats" comes up.

I am not saying that political discourse needs to be sanitized and that strong opinions cannot be stated. Far from it. I am concerned about many of these same things, but this sermon wants to take a moment to consider the motives in our hearts and the sorts of things we are saying and how those things are heard.

Be aware that if you preach this sermon you may well be stirring up some folks. On one hand there are the people who are saying these things and will not want some preacher

meddling in these issues and bringing God into it. They subscribe to a mistaken notion that church needs to stay in church and the world is out there and separate. They don't see that their prejudices are holistic and so is Christ's love. But there is another group to keep an eye on here. I see it in the young people in my classrooms who are fed up with a Church that speaks of God's love but never has an action for anyone but themselves. Theologically they are with you but this topic will roil some internal dynamics in families as many folks are appalled at what people say in their own families but don't know how to address it. The young person who heeds the fourth commandment and does not challenge the grandfather who says bigoted things about "them Mexicans" will hear this very differently than the grandfather will. You want to facilitate conversation and say this in a way that you get people to hear the whole sermon.

Saul of Tarsus imagined that these followers of the way were up to all sorts of nefarious things. He was willing to take action. Jesus had other ideas. The story of Paul's about face will need to be told. We can be terribly right about things and close our hearts and minds to the love of God. Jesus, however, has a way of breaking in, breaking us, and opening up our hearts for God's love. The old bigot will need to hear that and so will the young person who is frustrated with what he sees as a hypocritical Church that preaches God's love but never does it. The solution is always Jesus!

This will give us an occasion to hear Paul's words anew. The goal might be that the congregation enter a conversation about how we talk about people outside the parish. Do we refer to homosexuals in a way which conveys the love of God or simply a judgment which they may already know? The same could be said of an immigrant community or the people from the other side of the tracks. It could be said about people whose political views are different or just about anything.

Paul became all things for all people, so that some might be saved. God would do the saving, but through the broken and reshaped heart of Saul/Paul, he worked the salvation of many. That same Jesus works the same salvation today, through once bigoted, selfish folk who have completely misunderstood his mission.

4. Don't you know he has named all the stars? (OT – that the Holy Spirit would remove the anxiety from the parishioner and replace it with a joyful expectation of God's work in our midst.)

This sermon is designed for the deeply discouraged and fearful congregation. It is not the happy group who love one another – they look around the room and see the empty seats and are afraid. They are grieving what they perceive as a slow death of their parish and they have lost hope. They cannot see past what looks to them like an end. A few more funerals and we won't be able to carry on.

Isaiah was speaking to discouraged people who thought God had forgotten about them, abandoned them to the ravages of Babylonians and Assyrians. It was a hard time. Isaiah has them look up into the night sky and count the stars like Abraham did a long time ago. God has named everyone of them. His great knowledge and power holds them in their places. That God has not forgotten you nor has he abandoned you. Isaiah wants his people and us to hear the presences and love of God in this place.

But Isaiah also wants us to know that God's solutions are God's solutions, not ours. He often gives us something other than what we pray for. The Israelites I am sure were praying for a reversal of their fortunes, a new revitalization of their nation, success on the battle field, the restoration of the king. We like to tell God what to do. But God offers them strength and endurance, not the end of their troubles. He offers them eagle's wings.

Do we really want that? We want God to solve the problem, not equip me to solve the problem, not to help me endure the problem, not to help rise above the problem. I want the problem to go away. But God has other ways, not my ways (Isaiah 55). He gives us help, but not the help we asked for.

It is hard to lose that control or cede it to God. So he helps me with that problem too, imparting the living faith which enables me to be the sort of person who does this sort of thing.

That said, Isaiah also tells them that they should not judge this book by its cover, don't look at the external appearances. The God who numbered and named all those stars is very concerned about what happens to them. He renews the strength of Isaiah's readers, us. He imparts his zeal to us, his forgiveness and love. I don't have the solutions to this congregation's problems, but I have the forgiveness that looks at every situation and wonders what Jesus will do with it. Jesus offers to carry the burdens we cannot carry.

Jesus created this place and in his time, he will dispose of it. He will make sure that whatever happens will be for the good of his kingdom. I don't know that this means we will be able to have the St. Patrick's Day Potluck dinner we have had for the past 50 years or not. It does mean that whatever happens his kingdom still comes and his love does not end. He may be changing things, but those things never change. Don't worry about what he has in mind. It is good. He told you he loved you on the day of your baptism and he has never forgotten that promise. He did not promise you a church which you define, but he promised you a community which he defines, a body united to him in word and sacrament, a body in which his blood flows and his love is shared.