



“And Then”

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Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthews 3: 13-17

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Light to the Nations Isaiah 42:1-9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

² He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street;

³ a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

⁴ He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the
coastlands wait for his teaching.

⁵ Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,

who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:

⁶ I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, ⁷ to open the eyes that are
blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

⁸ I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.

⁹ See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

The Beloved Matthew 3: 13-17

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have
prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus
answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”
Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water,
suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove
and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom
I am well pleased.”

And Then

Last Sunday was according to the liturgical or church calendar Epiphany, the day that celebrates when the Magi, a foreign people of a different faith came and *saw God* in the person of the child Jesus. This time of year is for some called the *season* of Epiphany, a season to focus on how God is revealed, how God is tangible, how God is real, not a distant after thought to our days. A time to open ourselves to see in real ways what new things are being declared into the world. What words and ways of hope?

We need this season of Epiphany in a world rocked with upheaval, in this time, a time in which we may long to see the skies crack open and hear God's voice *clearly* telling us we are beloved, that we are his. We *long* to know this.

At the minister's meeting this past week we discussed a question that mostly pertains to those who are not a regular part of a faith community. And for that reason also matter to us. The question was "How do we help those who no longer *need* a God – encounter the living God in their lives?"

There were a variety of suggestions, I won't say answers, because many also responded honestly saying they didn't really know. And I don't see this as a bad thing really, I see this as our opportunity to remind ourselves *we* don't have all the answers, and our work together with each other and the churches we serve can seek to speak of *real* ways we see – or hope to see God. By owning these readings, this book, this story we delve into together as *our* story. It is active in our lives and we need to tell it, share it with each other, as we try to see and express how this story is actually happening today.

When I was a child growing up in Southern California, I encountered several different ways my friends celebrated Christmas. One friend whose parents were from Mexico told me about "La Posada," which celebrated the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. But what I remember most was that they did a kind of neighborhood parade singing and going door to door pretending they were searching for the Inn. And that it ended with a party and breaking a pinata filled with candy and little toys. And the story of Joseph and Mary's journey stuck with me.

Another friend's family celebrated all of what *I* thought of as Christmas on January 6, the day of Epiphany. Their house was decorated like mine with lights and a Christmas tree, but what I remember most was that Santa had to wait until January 6 at their house, and I felt bad for her that she got her presents so much later than me, and had to go to school the *next* day!

But she didn't feel bad, and her parents must have done a good job of holding and explaining the meaning of this to her and her siblings, because she told me how she received gifts like baby Jesus did on Epiphany, and that it was a time of lights shining, because now we could *see* God because of Jesus. And that story stuck with me.

I don't know that I understood then, but it does strike me how special these *different* celebrations of Jesus were to my friends. That there can be different ways we practice our experience of God's presence. I think this is why I was captivated by the simple line I used for our call to

meditation: that says "...we *practice* Epiphany. The challenge is always before us. Look again. Look harder. See freshly." If Epiphany means we see God more clearly, what does that look like?

What does all this have to do with our readings this morning?
In both we hear God's voice speaking true and profound words of promise and fulfillment. But I think for many – we struggle to actually claim some kind of experience of this, to feel it as tangible, real, and NOW.

This morning I am not choosing to discuss the meaning, role, or necessity of Baptism: Jesus' or ours. That is for another day. For today, I simply want us to hear the identity we also claim through Jesus; Light to the Nations, and Beloved.

It is God's disembodied voice that speaks to the embodied Jesus naming him "beloved" in the reading from Matthew. Jesus and everyone around hear this. *We* are meant to hear this. And one, amongst many things we can draw from this is that like Jesus, God's spirit speaks over us with the thing that really matters - *we are beloved*. Everything else follows that.

According to scripture, *this* is how Jesus' ministry begins. He hasn't said or done anything yet, and he is about to be tempted in the wilderness, where he hears repeatedly the challenging question, "*If you are the son of God...*" prove it and make bread out of stone, or jump of the highest point of the temple...

And Jesus basically answers, I am here to worship and serve God, I am not here to prove who I am, I am here to *be* who I am.

The fact that we are beloved cannot be taken away- and this invites *us* to be whose we are; praying, healing, feeding, teaching and touching the world with God's hope. We can become Light to the Nations. We reveal something about God in this way. We see God in this way. How do we practice Epiphany, how do we meet the challenge of this?
How do we look harder and see freshly?

Practice Epiphany- yes - through things like Baptisms and the celebration of Communion. But this is not the only way or time we are claimed or loved. Baptism itself doesn't *make* Jesus or us beloved, but it is one of the practices that reminds us this is so. This is not the only way or time God is revealed to us, but it is a tangible way to look harder and see freshly. And we need tangibles to help us see God.

But how do we share this with those who might not seem to be looking at all?
We preach and say and believe – sometimes in a pretty lukewarm way that God is with us. But most of us have never seen and followed a star, or watched a dove descend. Most of us haven't encountered a heavenly host bringing Good News. But what if God is appearing *all* the time! The challenge for us is to open ourselves to look again, look harder, perhaps see freshly.

Several years ago, my husband Tom had gone on a high school band trip to London as a chaperone. During a little free time he went for a walk looking for Buckingham Palace. Finally,

he stopped to talk to a guard with a tall furry hat, one of the Queens Guard, and asked him where Buckingham Palace was.

Tom had forgotten they were not supposed to speak to pedestrians.

At first the man just stared straight ahead and so Tom asked again. Finally, the man shrugged a bit and shook his head to the back saying quietly through clenched teeth, "Big building, can't miss it." And Tom realized he was standing right in front of it, but just hadn't seen!

Perhaps seeing God in the reality of Jesus is like this. We may be looking right at him but failed to recognize him. Or are we too busy looking for something else? Needing something else? Do we have any idea *what* we are looking for? I wonder.

Because here is another important way this story of Jesus' baptism is our story: When we wonder where and who we should look to, when we want an example of the living, tangible God at work? We start with how God sees us- and seems to define us.

Not by divided categories or branding such as: democrat or republican, citizen of the United States or of some other place. Not by social status or sexual identity. Not by how we dress or who we wear. These things simply have nothing to do with how God sees us.

At that same minister's meeting last Wednesday one of them said, "After all, what did God do *first* in Jesus? God put himself in our shoes." If we are looking for tangible, there it is.

Would God have done this only for a select few?

Scripture tries to tell us over and over again; we are ALL beloved.

And the way we practice Epiphany is to believe this is so - and see others as God sees.

That's how we begin. And then...God's possibilities in and through the world are endless.

I was also this week, so caught by a particular thing the Ministry Director at St. Ben's wrote in our conversation planning for today's visit with Father Muthu- when we would offer the check we had collected during the Summer Farmer's Markets. He said, "I am grateful that we 'create church' together every third Tuesday."

Create church together.

These are tangible ways we see God in our lives. There are more ways than Sunday morning that we create church together. Ways that we see God. Like those Saturday coffee booths at the farmers market when we had a chance to simply be the church in the parking lot.

Or a random conversation in the grocery line and a moment of faith. Or the story told without words by a kindness shared. And when the face across from you seems to hear, "You are beloved"

Tell your story of God, of the way Jesus came to walk in your shoes.

The story is unfolding all the time.

And then listen, because someone else is telling theirs.

Practice Epiphany, look harder and see freshly, you can't miss it!

Amen

