

2 Epiphany, year A, 2023

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Epiphany Lessons

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Last week, as we were celebrating the feast of the Epiphany, I suggested that the church season we are now in should no longer be called the Season After Epiphany, but we should call it The Season of Many Epiphanies. So taking my own advice, I thought we might spend our sermon times together this season looking for epiphanies, those manifestations of Jesus that beckon us and reveal to us not only who Jesus is, but who we are as well – as disciples and as church.

Today's passage from the Gospel of John is a juicy one! There are no less than three epiphanies in it. And they each have something important to say about what happens to people when they encounter God in Jesus. We might even consider them Epiphany lessons that teach us how to be church.

Our first Epiphany lesson is from John the Baptist.. Accounts of the baptism of Jesus are in all four gospels. But in the Gospel of John, we never actually see Jesus get wet. What we have is John the Baptist's account of what happened. The priests and levites were sent by the leaders in Jerusalem to find out if John was the Messiah. And he points them to Jesus, who he has just baptized.

Then John says something interesting, that I had never noticed before. He says " I myself did not know him, but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." And that made me wonder if that's where John had been looking for God to be revealed all along – in the Jordan River. I got this image of John checking every face to see if this was the one – dunk... is this the one?...nope ... dunk... is this the one? next..

Until Jesus got in the water, and God told John the Baptist he could stop searching.

This is John the Baptist's epiphany, and he had an essential part to play in it. He realized that he was to be the signpost and Jesus was to be destination.

I love how John the Baptist takes on this role. It must not have been easy – he was popular, he could draw a crowd and convince them to get dunked in the chilly Jordan river to freshen up their covenant with God. He had followers. He

had the ear of kings, which didn't serve him so well in the end. But the fruit of John's epiphany was that none of that mattered compared to this role of pointing to the one that God had sent to redeem Israel.

Here is John the Baptist's Epiphany lesson for us: Churches are often destination locations. We are communities where people can feel welcomed, needed, accepted and engaged. Plus there is a coffee hour. But an important question for us is not how good a destination are we, but how effective a signpost are we. Because our role is really to direct people to Jesus? –How do we as church point people to Jesus, and assist Jesus in calling his followers? That's lesson number 1.

Today's second Epiphany lesson happens the next day in John's Gospel. The Baptist is standing with two of his disciples. When he sees Jesus coming, John assumes his new role as signpost and says "Look. Here is the Lamb of God." Which must be code for stop following me, and check out the new guy, because those disciples take off after Jesus. They are not following him, not yet, but they are tailing him. They are tracking him, trying to get a good look as their master had instructed them. Until Jesus notices and turns around and says: What are you looking for?"

Now if you were a follower of John the Baptist, it meant that you were already looking for something – you were longing for something new to happen in Israel, and you were likely wondering if the Messiah was near. Because that's what John the Baptist was talking about.. And here you think you are being so discrete in your search, but Jesus catches you out with one of those questions that can mean so many things. What are you looking for?

John's disciples answer him by saying "where are you staying?" Which sounds kind of lame, like, oh we were just wondering where the local rabbis are getting a good deal on overnight accommodations. But the word those disciples use is: abide. Where do you abide? The author of John's Gospel likes that word, abide. He uses it for the special relationship Jesus has with his disciples and his Abba – abide in my love, as I abide in my father's love.<sup>1</sup> So this is a conversation that's happening on more than one level. Their deeper question is – do you abide with

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<sup>1</sup> Fr. Demetrius Dumm, adapted from *Praying the Scriptures* in *Give us this Day*.

God in the way that we long to abide with God? Do you abide with God the way our teacher John, does? Are you the one we are looking for?

And with what might just be a wink Jesus answers, Come and See.

Notice the wonderful interplay that is happening with Jesus, because it's at the heart of this second lesson. This epiphany starts with a heart that seeks and is willing to follow to where the signpost is pointing. And to that heart, Jesus says "what are you looking for?" He turns the question back on the seekers, challenging them to check in with their own deepest desires.

Back and forth goes this dynamic Epiphany. Where do you abide? they ask. Come and See, replies Jesus.

*Come*, a beckoning, an invitation to follow. And *see...* for yourselves; test your experience against your longing; witness to the truth. In this lesson, the epiphany has feet; you have to run to catch up with it. It is relational, playful, challenging, inviting. And never ending.

Come and See will be the definition of the rest of their lives as followers of Jesus: coming along with Jesus and seeing all that happens from one little town to another all the way to Jerusalem and the cross. Come and See is all they will do from that point on.

As church the question for us in this Epiphany lesson is: How willing are we to run after Jesus, to find out where he is staying now? When Jesus says "come" do we move out of our comfort zone, our familiar patterns and get a move on? And when Jesus says "see" do we take a good look? Do we as church bear witness? Do we tell others what we have seen?

The Third Epiphany Lesson involves one of those disciples, Andrew and his brother Simon. Andrew liked what he saw. So much so that he went home and he told his brother the good news: "We have found the Messiah." Andrew became a signpost for Simon, just as John the Baptist had become one for him.

Andrew brings Simon to Jesus, and Jesus gives Simon a good look. He sees Simon, really sees him. Can you imagine being looked at like that? Jesus looks at him so thoroughly, so truthfully, that Simon's very name changes – from Simon, which means one who listens, to Peter, which means rock. Peter is not just one who will

take the Word in. He is one whom the Word will be built upon. He will be a foundation for it.

And so this Epiphany lesson for us as church asks us if we are willing to let Jesus change our very identity. We think we are one thing; what if Jesus wants us to be something else? What if he wants to change our name, or our membership, or our ministries? What if we think we're really good at doing one thing, and we find out that Jesus is going to empower us to do something new?

What if the coming and the seeing is not just one way? What if Jesus has come to see – us? This is an important question for a community that calls itself St. Peter's. Are we willing to be seen by Jesus, so deeply, so intimately, that by the end of that gaze we are something new? That would be a spine-tingling Epiphany indeed. And we're only in the second week of the season!

Now I want to give you a more recent example of how Epiphanies show up in our everyday lives, how they empower the work of Christ. It's an epiphany that Martin Luther King had one evening in January of 1956.<sup>2</sup> King had recently become the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the organization that would help guide the Montgomery bus boycott. Dr. King had begun to receive threatening phone calls. One caller said "if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out and blow up your house."

King was truly frightened. He couldn't calm himself down. Finally in his kitchen, bowed over a cup of coffee, he cried out to God for help. "And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, 'Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world,'" King recounted later. He said that that voice, the voice of Jesus, "promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone."

That was Martin Luther King's epiphany lesson. At the moment that he was at the end of his rope, alone and terrified in his kitchen -- "I discovered then that religion had to become real to me and I had to know God for myself," he said. That was the moment Jesus manifested himself in King's life in a way that changed

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<sup>2</sup> Recounted by Jeff Kelly Lowenstein in an opinion piece for CNN, *How a little-known incident in 1956 unnerved MLK*. Fri January 15, 2021. <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/15/opinions/martin-luther-king-jr-crisis-of-faith-lowenstein/index.html>

everything. Three days later King's house was bombed. And that was just the beginning of a long and dangerous struggle for Civil Rights for people of color that King led. Martin's part in that struggle would end with his assassination in 1968. But what God manifested through him continued, and still continues, because the work that Jesus was doing in his servant Martin has not been completed yet.

On this the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's, it's a good time to remember that more often than not God Epiphanies to people are through people. Our saints, like Peter or like Martin Luther King, remind us that our weakest, most frightened and most searching moments, are often the ones that Jesus chooses to begin his most urgent work.

So what have we learned in our Epiphany lessons today:

That we are called to be the sign post to Jesus who is the destination

And that in order to do that we have to come along with Jesus and see where he is, where he is abiding.

And in doing that we have to be willing to be seen by Jesus, to be changed.

And finally, because these are Epiphanies that change the world, we might get really scared at times and feel incredibly unqualified. But if Jesus abides in us that means that he will be with us until the end of the time.

And here, ends the lesson.

Amen.