

Epiphany of the Lord

Isaiah 60:1-6 - “Arise, shine” in verse 1 means, “Stand up and let us see you in all your radiant glory.” Isaiah has a vision of hope that indicates the long night of suffering will soon be over for Jerusalem, and a new day would soon dawn... a day when she will rise from the dust where she has lain for so long. Radiance will replace ruin, joy will displace sorrow, and abundance will overcome poverty.

Ephesians 3:1-12 - Paul’s ministry was unique. As a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul served as an apostle to the Gentiles. He consistently sought to reveal the mystery of God’s intention to bond Jew and Gentile together as one believing community... one body of Christ (vv. 1-7). He is quick to recognize he does not deserve this commission, but he rejoices in it because God chose him to reveal the wonder of God’s eternal plan.

Matthew 2:1-12 - It is uncertain whether the star was a supernova, a comet, a conjunction of planets, or a totally supernatural apparition, as may be implied in 2:9. However, it is clear the magi (wise men) and Matthew recognize it as the fulfillment of Numbers 24:17.

The magi were seeking the King; Herod was opposing the King; and the Jewish priests were ignoring the King. These Jewish priests knew the Scriptures and pointed others to the Savior, *but they would not go to worship Him themselves!* They quoted Micah 5:2 but did not obey it. They were *five miles* from the very Son of God, yet they did not go to see Him!

Do You See What I See?

Epiphany means to “reveal” or “to make known.” It might well be known as the “do you see what I see” season. A young girl living in poverty and raising a baby greeted wise men seeking a King. No doubt, this didn’t fit with their expectations. But their hearts were seeking and eager to find God so they put aside their preconceived ideas and worshiped anyway.

Jewish priests knew scripture. They knew the fulfillment of the text. But their hearts were not looking for God. They were seeking position and stature. There was no room for worship and they missed the King.

What are you seeking? Are you ready to see God in unexpected places and circumstances? He’s there, waiting to reveal Himself. Go ahead – follow the wise men. Put aside your preconceived ideas. Bow down. Worship.

Prayer:

Almighty God, who led the wise men by a shining star; lead me now by faith, revealing Your presence and glory in my life. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

First Sunday after the Epiphany, Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 42:1-9 - The chapter begins with the first of several passages known as the “servant songs,” because they deal with a “servant of the Lord.” The ideal servant introduced here is the Messiah, whom God has empowered and called to establish justice on the Earth.

The servant of the Lord’s mission is to “[establish] justice in the earth” (vv. 1–4), and to be “a light to the nations” (vv. 5–9).

Acts 10:34-43 - This brief summary of Peter’s sermon is in full harmony with the earlier evangelistic sermons recorded in Acts. The heart of the Gospel is the historic Christ, crucified and risen again, in accord with the teachings of Old Testament Scriptures.

Matthew 3:13-17 - Jesus made a special trip from Galilee to be baptized by John. Although John saw no need for Christ to submit to a rite that implied a need for repentance (vv. 13–14), Jesus insisted, saying that it was right to identify Himself with John’s message (v. 15). After the baptism, the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descended on Jesus, and the Father’s voice from heaven identified Jesus as “My Son.”

Everyday Graces

Often, we think of God as a “Grand Canyon” kind of God. Big. Deep. Vast. Awe-inspiring. He is. But most of us don’t live at the Grand Canyon. We live ordinary lives in ordinary communities under ordinary circumstances. What does God look like here?

Today’s readings remind us that God is seen in everyday graces. He is gentle and compassionate, “... *a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench... I have taken you by the hand and kept you.*” God is waiting to hold and comfort you.

To answer our questions and doubts, God finds practical ways to reassure us, “... *to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.*” He knows that our faith is tested and He is waiting to reassure us of His presence and Lordship.

Why is this important? Because we are people who experience reality through our senses – sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch. God comes to us in the waters of baptism, the Body and Blood of the Eucharist, the fellowship of believers, the flickering of candlelight, and the sounds of hymns. It is these everyday graces that make God real and knowable in our everyday lives. *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory...*”

Prayer:

Gracious Lord, who clothed Yourself in humanity, help me to meet and see You each day, remembering the covenant of salvation and confessing you as Lord and Savior. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 49:1-7 - From before His birth, God's Servant was called to His ministry (Jer. 1:5; Gal. 1:15); and God prepared Him like a sharp sword and a polished arrow (Heb. 4:12; Rev. 1:16). Messiah came as both a Servant and a Warrior, serving those who trust Him and ultimately judging those who resist Him.

1 Corinthians 1:1-9 - Paul confronts a dysfunctional church by reminding them of their high and holy position in Christ. He reminds them that they have been set apart by God (vv. 1-3) and enriched by God's grace (vv. 4-6). He tells them that they are to wait expectantly for Christ's return (v. 7), and that they must be dependent upon God's faithfulness (vv. 8-9).

John 1:29-42 - The title: "The Lamb of God" sums up the love, sacrifice, suffering, and triumph of Christ. What John is saying is not that he did not know **who** Jesus was, but that he did not know **what** Jesus was. It had suddenly been revealed to him that Jesus was none other than the Son of God.

What's In A Name

Ask a parent about their new baby's name, and they'll proudly tell you about its meaning or the relative or friend their child is named after. What we are called is important, even defining aspects of our personality or character traits.

Today's readings remind us of this importance. Isaiah's words state, "The Lord called me before I was born, while in my mother's womb he named me." Paul's letter to the church in Corinth is a call to live as those who bear the name of Christ, set apart, enriched by grace, expectantly waiting for Christ's return, and dependent upon God's faithfulness. In the Gospel, John declares of Jesus, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" And Jesus Himself said to Simon, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas (meaning Peter)."

We are not only made in the image and likeness of God, we bear the name of His Son. As Christians, we reveal to the watching world glimpses of God. In us – because of us – they see Him.

What are we showing them? In us, what do they see of Him?

We are called Christians, named after Jesus Christ. It's important that we live in such a way as to invite from others the question, "Tell me about the One you're named after?"

Prayer:

Loving God, illumine my life by Your Word and sacraments so that You are known and worshiped by those around me. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 9:1-4 - The lands of Zebulun and Naphtali (Northern Israel) had been conquered by Assyria. Isaiah sees a future time when a “great light will be revealed” and the nation will multiply and experience increased joy. This “great light” will be the Messiah, who will be human and deity: “A Child is born... A Son is given” (v. 6).

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 - Paul is concerned about the division in the church at Corinth. He stresses three Christian priorities: unity, allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ and the proclamation of the gospel. He asks three questions: *Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul* (v. 13)? His intent is to have them focus solely upon Jesus so that only the gospel will be proclaimed.

Matthew 4:12-23 - Following the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus begins his own ministry in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, in the region of Capernaum. Matthew quotes Isaiah, reinforcing that Jesus is the “great light” spoken of by the prophet Isaiah. At that time the population was mixed, with many Jews but also many Gentiles present. The great light dawning in this area (vv. 15–17) may foreshadow the fact that the salvation Jesus brings is for all.

What makes a disciple is his or her willingness to follow Jesus. Following Him produces people who share Christ’s concern for drawing others to God (v.19). People who are truly excited about Jesus are still the best way to communicate the Gospel.

Seeing Is Believing

Today’s readings reveal a future that is yet to be experienced. His nation in ruins, Isaiah’s words reveal a future when his people and nation are restored... prosperous... joyful. Paul’s words and admonition point to a unified Body of Christ. The ministry of Jesus in Zebulun and Naphtali touch the lives of Jews and Gentiles alike, foretelling a salvation for all people.

This season of Epiphany – as well as life’s seasons of epiphanies – does the same. Christ is revealed, as is our future found in Him. The Word enters our life and reveals healing even in the midst of sickness... peace as we wrestle with chaos and uncertainty... provision even as we hear headlines of economic and political turmoil.

As we read today’s scriptures, we recognize that even now, parts of the Word are yet to be fulfilled. The same is true in our lives. Epiphany offers the opportunity to see through eyes of faith the reality God is in the midst of creating. It is this faith – based on the Word of God – He uses to fashion our world and us into His ultimate image of restoration and wholeness.

Prayer:

Gracious God, open my eyes to see Your glory and the good You are creating in my life and the world around me. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Micah 6:1-8 - The prophet condemns Israel's leaders and shows the contrast between the corrupt society they had shaped and the glorious and peaceful kingdom to be formed by the coming Messiah/King. God yearns for His people to do good, and walk humbly with Him (vv.3-8). Anything less is displeasing to God. No society that is marked by violence, lying, and deceit will stand – especially when it is called by God's Name.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 - Paul's key focus in this passage is that we dare not mix man's wisdom with God's revealed message: The cross. God's wisdom is revealed primarily in the cross of Jesus Christ. Paul points out three different attitudes people have toward the cross:

1) Some will stumble at the cross (v.23a). The Jews were more impressed with miraculous signs, and the cross appeared to be weakness. **2) Some will laugh at the cross** (v. 23b). This was the response of the Greeks. To them, the cross was foolishness. It (the cross) defied human wisdom. **3) Some will experience the power and wisdom of the cross** (v. 24). Those who have been called by God's grace and who have responded by faith, realize that Christ is God's power and wisdom. In the death of Christ, God reveals the foolishness of man's wisdom and the weakness of man's power.

Matthew 5:1-12 - Matthew summarizes the preaching of Jesus in a passage known as the "Sermon on the Mount" (chaps. 5-7). Jesus begins with a series of statements known as the "Beatitudes" (5:1-12). These surprising statements of blessing underline the difference between human values and God's, and call us to view life and success God's way.

What A Fool Believes

The Doobie Brothers had it right... "What a fool believes he sees, no wise man has the power to reason away."

Today's readings might well borrow this popular song for its theme. Just listen to the words of Jesus. "Blessed are the poor... those who mourn... the meek..." Then and now, those words run counter to our get-ahead strategies and philosophies. In a "might makes right" world, there's no value in being meek. "Happy at all costs" trumps those who mourn any day. And in our "he who dies with the most toys wins" world, there's no glory in being poor in spirit.

The words of Jesus are no less difficult today than they were when He spoke them more than 2000 years ago. And they are no less true.

So... what do you see?

Prayer:

Almighty God, give grace that I may see and know You, revealing your love and life to those around me. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

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The Presentation of the Lord

Malachi 3:1-4 - The Old Testament reading comes to us from an “in-between” place. God’s people have been brought back from exile and are anticipating God’s presence with them, but they haven’t experienced it as of yet. In the past, the Temple was where God lived, and his presence was always with them. Because of the exile, they knew that God wasn’t with them in the same way he was in the past. Something new was needed.

Malachi prophesies that the new thing is coming. “... See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight— indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.”

Little did they know it would be a four-hundred-year wait. Malachi marks the beginning of a long pause in God’s voice that lasts until the Gospels burst forth on the scene with Christ’s annunciation.

We, like Malachi and his hearers, are in an “in-between” place. The place of promised return and the here-and-now.

Hebrews 2:14-18 - Jesus is truly unique. He is human and can relate to all of us. He is God and can operate on our behalf in ways we simply can’t. He is greater than angels yet willing to submit himself to human life. Because of his Holy Spirit, we can live the life he has called us to live. The Holy Spirit transforms us into something we could never be without him. He is the Center for Christians in every way. He is in, above, below, around, beside and outside of our lives and experiences. Because he is all these things and because he has lived as one of us, we can trust him. We can trust him to be a merciful priest to make an all-sufficient offering on our behalf.

Luke 2:22-40 - Mary and Joseph were good Jews. They knew the Law and lived it out in their relationship.

Presenting their son would have been a duty, honor, and privilege. Given the bizarre circumstances of his conception and birth, bringing him to the Temple must have felt like a convergence of sorts.

Angels, the Holy Spirit, dreams and threatening kingdoms are all methods God had used in the past. Now, it was happening again to this young couple and this baby. Entering the epicenter of God’s presence (the Temple), God confirms he is once again up to something miraculous. Simeon, who is righteous and devout says, “*Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.*” Further, Anna the prophetess praises God because of Jesus.

All of these actions in the Temple lead Luke’s readers to understand that God has heard the cries of his people, as before in Egypt. He is at work bringing salvation and liberation. There is no holier place in Israel than the Temple. It is where God resides and where Jesus is recognized as the long-awaited hope of Israel.

A Living Gospel

Can we trust God? Will God do what he says? Will he do what he has done in the past? Does he hear our cries for help? These are questions on the minds of many Christians. Our lives seem to be caught in the in-between time of Malachi, while we hope and wait for God to do something. Perhaps we want a change of circumstance, or for him to show his grace and mercy. Whatever it may be, we place our hope upon his shoulders, and we wait. Simeon had been waiting for some time. God promised he wouldn’t die until he saw God’s salvation. He was waiting, trusting, watching, hoping.

When we read these stories, it is easy for us to feel as if it was good for them but “What about me?”

If it is true that God doesn’t change (it is) and he is good (he is), then we too can have hope in Christ. God will act with mercy in the way he has done in the past. He will deal graciously with you and me because he identifies with us. All we have to do is wait and trust in his faithfulness, and we will see the salvation of the Lord.

Prayer:

Strong and mighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus, the presentation of your Son in the temple was his first entrance into the place of sacrifice. Grant that, trusting in his offering upon the cross to forgive our sins and uphold us in the time of trial, we may sing your praises and live in the light of your salvation, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12) - Isaiah pleads with his listeners to grasp the reality of sin. He describes a superficial religiousness (vv. 1-3a) that uncovers the hypocrisy of a people whose personal lives – and society – are corrupt (vv. 3b-7). However, if Israel desires a spiritual reformation and puts away “the yoke of oppression,” God will answer His people’s prayers and sustain them.

1 Corinthians 2:1-12 (13-16) - Paul abandoned the approach taken by itinerant philosophers and teachers when he came to Corinth, to rely totally on God’s Spirit in his presentation of the Gospel (2:1-5). Paul’s present appeal does display “wisdom,” but a secret wisdom, which is beyond the comprehension of mankind (vv. 6-10a). The Spirit of God (who, being God knows the thoughts of God) has revealed that wisdom in words. And these spiritual truths (contained in those Spirit-shaped words) are interpreted by the Spirit to those, who through faith in Christ possess the Spirit.

Matthew 5:13-20 - When we wish to stress someone’s solid worth and usefulness, we say of that person: “People like that are the salt of the earth.” In the ancient world salt was highly valued; often connected with purity. Salt was a common preservative, used to keep things from going bad. As followers of Christ, we have a certain antiseptic influence on life.

People need light to see. As followers of Christ, our lights are to shine before others so that others will see the glory of our Father in heaven.

Taste And See That The Lord Is Good

Good parents live out and model for their children how to live. Children learn to be honest by observing the honesty of their parents. They learn responsibility, kindness, and compassion the same way.

In a very similar way, people around us learn about God. If they see hypocrisy and “religiosity,” it is the same as a parent who instructs, “Do as I say and not as I do.” That’s why today’s readings are full of concrete examples of how we are to live, revealing God to the world around us.

Isaiah’s words tell God’s people – and us – to break the bonds of injustice, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and clothe the naked. Jesus tells us to bring flavor and preservation to the world – to shine a light that reveals both a dwelling place and the glory of God.

Through us, the world can taste and see the goodness of God. Through us, God is revealed and the world restored.

Prayer:

Set me free, O God, from my sin and free me to live out the abundance of Your life through Jesus Christ. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 - The nature of a covenant relationship is predicated upon trust. God promises blessings to be poured out upon Israel, contingent upon Israel's trust, demonstrated through obedience to God's commandments. As long as Israel remains faithful, or if a future generation returns to God after straying, God will restore and bless.

The choice for Israel – and each of us – is whether we will choose God or emptiness, blessing or disaster, life or death.

1 Corinthians 3:1-9 - It is easy to become distracted and to get our eyes off of Christ. The Corinthians argued over the merits of mere human leaders; becoming jealous and bickering over human capacities. They lost the spiritual insight that had been given to them by the Spirit of God.

Paul reminds us: Human leaders are servants of God, God is the source of all growth, and God's priority is the congregation. He stresses that leaders are simply workers in God's field, and that the church is the field. Ultimately, Christ is the foundation and the church is God's temple.

Matthew 5:21-37 - Jesus uses the subjects of murder, adultery, divorce, and oaths to reveal how deceptive our own hearts can be.

While the Pharisees understood murder in the literal sense, Jesus reminds them – and us – that even harmful words can kill a person's spirit, and lustful attitudes can constitute adultery. Although the Old Testament allowed divorce, it was not commanding divorce. The Pharisees were experts in manipulating the oaths they had made to God. Jesus insists upon straightforward truthfulness, and reminded them that the breaking of a vow is subject to God's punishment.

Life Is Beautiful

A Holocaust survivor was interviewed shortly before his death and asked to comment about his life. "Life is beautiful," the old man replied. The journalist pointed out that this man lost his entire family in the concentration camps and witnessed the evils of the Nazis firsthand.

The old man insisted, stating he had also experienced the power of kindness as he was rescued. He went on to point out the freedom of forgiveness, the joy of marrying and raising his own family, and leaving a legacy for others.

This old man chose life, prosperity, and the power of blessing. He understood the potential of evil in his own heart and, instead, opened his heart to God's goodness. Today's readings are the basis for this wisdom. We, too, can recognize how quickly our own hearts can become darkened by sin as Jesus points out. Instead, we can daily choose life, experiencing God's blessing and goodness.

Prayer:

Gracious God, outside of You there is no good in me. Give me grace to keep your commandments and experience Your life. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

*Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18 - The regulations given in chapter 19 have direct relationship to the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17). These precepts are the basis for all Jewish and moral law. These statutes are not man's, they are God's law. We belong to God, and because God is holy, we must be a holy people (vv. 1-2).

1 Corinthians 3:10-11, 16-23 - The source of power for the Christian life is realized because the Holy Spirit dwells within the follower of Christ. The Holy Spirit enables us to serve God and live the holy and good life that we are called to. Because the Holy Spirit lives in us, we are God's "holy temple," and as a result we can be holy. Paul warns those who follow Christ not to bring ruin on God's temple.

Matthew 5:38-48 - The Law was not given to exact revenge, but rather to legislate justice. Jesus clarifies that – though the Law supported retaliation – mercy was always the acceptable intention underlying these laws. For followers of Christ, insisting upon a "pound of flesh" falls short. Mercy goes beyond the accepted requirement of going one mile. We're to go two. It's easy to love those who love you. But to love your enemies is to imitate the love of God.

An The Greatest Of These Is Love

The common denominator of today's readings is love. Leviticus instructs the people to leave portions of their harvest available for the poor, an act of loving and dignified compassion. Paul urges believers to build carefully on the foundation of Christ and to care for each other and themselves as temples in which God's spirit dwells. And Jesus Himself urges His followers to go the extra mile, praying for their enemies.

Through love, God is revealed – to others and to ourselves. Practicing compassion, treating others and ourselves with respect, and praying for our enemy changes us. It forces us to confront our own need for salvation and restoration.

Only when our hearts have been changed can we then reflect that love to others. Only when we have learned to love ourselves as Christ loves us can we truly love our neighbor in ways that reveal God's love.

Prayer:

Loving God, send Your Holy Spirit and pour into my heart Your greatest gift, that everything I do is rooted in Your love. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 49:8-16a - Isaiah foresees the time when, just like Moses who led the nation out of bondage in Egypt, God will lead His people out of captivity in Babylon. And, Isaiah looks beyond the deliverance from Babylon to the time when there will be a glorious kingdom... a time when the Lord will call people from the ends of the earth.

Although the Bible emphasizes the fatherhood of God, there is also the “motherhood” side of God’s nature that we must not forget. Isaiah pictures Israel as a nursing child, totally dependent on the Lord who will never forget or forsake them.

1 Corinthians 4:1-5 - As a minister (servant) of the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul was aware of the enormous responsibility that was entrusted to him with the gospel. All followers of Christ are trustees of the gospel (the good news of Christ). It is not the servant who must be prominent, but rather the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus judges those who serve Him. We are to live our lives in the light of the all-searching judgment that is to come.

Matthew 6:24-34 - Jesus longs for his followers to be free of anxiety and worry. He identifies three sources of anxiety: our bodies (the length of our life and the state of our health), our food (what we will eat), and our clothes (what we will wear). He reminds us that these are the things of what the Gentiles’ (those who have no covenant relationship to God) seek after.

In the kingdom of heaven, things are different. We have a heavenly Father who cares for us. God is mindful of even the slightest of details of nature (the lilies of the field and the birds of the air). How much more is He mindful of our needs?

A Comforting Embrace

It’s amazing how a crying child is instantly comforted by his mother’s embrace. No matter how large the problem, the child trusts that in the loving presence of his mother, a solution will be found.

Today’s readings call us to model this childlike trust and run to our Heavenly Father for protection and provision. Although God typically reveals Himself in scripture in masculine terms, the Isaiah passage clearly offers a glimpse of God’s tenderness, using maternal and nurturing terms to describe His care for His children. And Jesus, having clothed Himself in our humanity and experiencing the cares of this earthly life, urges His followers to place those burdens where they belong: in God’s capable hands.

Are your burdens heavy? Are you weary with the worry of provision and protection? Solutions are found in the loving embrace of your Heavenly Father!

Prayer:

Merciful God, help me to fear nothing but the loss of You, casting all my cares on You and trusting that nothing on this earth will hide me from Your eternal love. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*

Ninth Sunday after the Epiphany

Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28 - Follow God and you are blessed. Don't follow God and you are cursed. Seems pretty straight forward. Moses was recording the Law for God's people as they made themselves into a nation in the Ancient Near East.

In order to set themselves apart and follow God, Moses called the people to... "put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates,".

Doing this would result in a blessing. Not the act of these things but the following of God's Law and ensuring that it is fixed in every area of their lives. This Law is meant to preserve, protect and demark Israel as God's people, holy and distinct from those around them. The blessings that come from this have to do with fruitfulness and land that God has given. Not following these Laws means predictable suffering and loss.

Romans 1:16-17, 3:22b-28; 29-31 - The Gospel or Good News is simply stated: Jesus is Lord. This means he is lord over Caesar, the Jewish leaders, all the earth, hell, sin and even death. Because he is lord over all, faith in Jesus is for all people, not just the Jews.

Paul knows how ridiculous this sounds and even though he is in jail for it, he claims he is not ashamed. Why? Because faith in Jesus is the "power of God for salvation..."

The Law was given to turn hearts and minds to God and produce faith in him, not faith in the Law. Therefore, if you uphold the Law without faith, it means nothing. However, if you have faith in Jesus, who perfectly fulfilled the Law, you uphold the Law. Because of this, Paul holds the Law and faith in tension because it is Jesus who is Lord and that is truly Good News.

Matthew 7:21-29 - Appearances can be deceiving. When looking at a home, the outside can look just fine. However, a quick glance and walk-through are not enough to know if the house is sound. An inspection is required when purchasing a home to uncover underlying problems needing repair. Issues like roof leaks, termites or even cracked foundations require a bit more scrutiny than a curbside view.

That is what Matthew is getting at in this passage. On the outside, people may "look Christian." They may say the right things, do the right things, but that doesn't mean their heart is in the right place.

Built on the rock, or sand? Only God can examine us to the core. The way he chooses to perform his examination varies. It may be a private evaluation between man and God, or a public display, like a storm that destroys an unfit structure. Whichever it is, God will be diligent; his inspection will go straight to the foundation.

No Substitutes

A friend of mine once asked if I was willing to settle for a laminate or if I wanted the real thing. That question has helped me think through many decisions in my life. The appearance of something isn't the thing. Oak laminates aren't oak all the way through. They are a cheap substitute for authentic oak products.

Every day we are tempted to be satisfied with something less than the Lordship of Christ. Our world offers us an array of opportunities to settle with appearances and substitutes. On the outside, it can look just fine. Especially to those around us. "I thought they were ok." Or, "They seemed just fine." are phrases spoken when we are suddenly faced with the disintegration of someone's life as difficulties arise.

Our relationship with Christ is not something we can play at or settle for appearances. The Gospel requires us to take a good hard look at all areas of our lives. It is up to us to ensure our foundations are secure. We can't settle for a laminate if we intend to follow Jesus. We must do the hard work of replacing our life with his by embracing his word, surrendering our plans and trusting in his goodness in an effort to be authentic through and through.

Prayer:

O Lord, faithful God, you are our rock and our refuge. Help us to hear your word as truth and to act on it in faith, that all may come to know your love. Amen.

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Transfiguration Sunday, Last Sunday before Lent

Exodus 24:12-18 - Relationship with God is not just a matter of moral and religious duty. There is a mutual commitment: God will protect and bless His people, if they remain separate and committed to Him. God's covenant, offered to the people of Israel, had been welcomed, enthusiastically. In fact, they vowed to do "everything the Lord had said" (24:1-3).

Moses ascends the mountain and enters into the very presence of God. The "covenant making King" invites us – not only to enjoy the benefits of the covenant – but to enter into a personal relationship with Him.

2 Peter 1:16-21 - In a court of law, it is common for the prosecution to ask the question: "What did you see?" Eyewitnesses are key in any case. Peter declares that the stories of the power and coming of the Lord, Jesus Christ, were not a fabrication or a figment of imagination. He (along with many others) had personally witnessed this glory. At the transfiguration of Jesus, they had heard the voice that came from heaven, declaring that "This (Jesus) is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Mt. 17:5).

Despite voices that suggest that Jesus may not be the only way to God... there is no way to satisfaction, life and glory other than through the well-beloved Son of the ever-living God.

Matthew 17:1-9 - This passage affords us clear echoes of Old Testament theophany (an appearance of God); like the appearance of God on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24). In similar manner, Jesus takes three representatives to a mountain, where his appearance is transformed to the extent that his native, divine splendor radiates through his clothes and in his face.

The voice from heaven serves to reveal that Jesus is one with the prophetic tradition, represented by Moses and Elijah, but that he is also the consummator of that tradition.

Down From the Mountain

We all want mountain top experiences – those awe-inspiring moments in God's presence when we are transformed. We want God's "big voice," speaking words of affirmation, reassuring us that our faith is not misplaced. And in certain circumstances and seasons, God reveals Himself to us in these mountain top moments.

Like the disciples, we are tempted to escape the daily responsibilities of life and want to "set up camp" where we can bask in the glories of God's presence. But notice what happens in today's readings. In the Old Testament readings, Moses eventually had to come down from the mountain. So did Jesus and the disciples. So do we.

We come down from the mountain bearing the radiance of God's transforming and revelatory power – and we re-enter everyday life, shining His presence into our world. This is the work of Epiphany in us; it is the work of God through us to illumine our world with His life.

Prayer:

"Almighty God, as I experience the illuminating light of Your presence, help me to shine Your light into the world around me. Blessed be God forever. Amen."

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A*