

Epiphany of the Lord

Isaiah 60:1-6 - Hard times have a tendency to obscure the light of hope. Isaiah's words cut through the shadows of despair to remind the people that when the glory of Yahweh rises upon them, moral and spiritual darkness gives way to the "light" – the glory of the LORD.

Ephesians 3:1-12 - Paul reminds the Ephesians – and us – of how, through revelation, a great "mystery" was made known to him. That "mystery" was that those not of Jewish descent had become joint-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ, and that through the Church this "mystery" is made known.

Matthew 2:1-12 - The Wise men were more than likely Oriental astrologers who studied the stars, seeking to understand the times. They followed the star that led them to Bethlehem where Christ was born. These Gentiles gave homage and worshipped the newborn King.

Open the Gift

Epiphany means "to reveal" or "to make known." In the Western Church, the season of Epiphany is associated with the wise men who followed a star and discovered Jesus Christ, the Messiah. They offered precious gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The treasure of their gifts revealed the hidden depths of their hearts.

Gifts have a way of doing this. From a much-loved child, a parent treats crumpled paper embellished with a few swipes of a crayon as a gift far more valuable than expensive jewelry. Its worth is weighed in love. Opening such a gift is an epiphany, revealing the heart of both the giver and receiver.

Today we celebrate the Gift of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, gaining a deeper understanding of the endless love contained in such a lavish gift. God wrapped up the wellspring of love, the essence of hope, and gave us Jesus – cherished and beloved from before all time. Let the miracle of this love be a source of epiphany in your own heart this day!

Prayer:

God, you revealed the gift of your Son through the shining of a star. Lead me to see more clearly your glory revealed through Jesus Christ. Through me, lead others to see you revealed as Savior and King. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

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

Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 43:1-7 - Though Israel had proven to be a “blind and deaf servant” (42:18-25), the nation had a special relationship to God. They were His messenger. Although they had failed in their mission, God still had wonderful things for his people. God created Israel, and they still figured in his plan. He would redeem them, call them by name, and protect them.

All who belong to God have assurance that we are a part of his plan and mission.

Acts 8:14-17 - When it was reported that the Samaritans had “received the Word of God,” Peter and John were sent from Jerusalem to lay their hands on the converts and impart to them the gift of the Spirit. The reason is that God desired to unite the Samaritan believers with the original Jewish church in Jerusalem.

The mission of God for his followers requires unity. The natural propensity of division between Jews and Samaritans could only be bridged by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 - People were waiting and wondering with expectation. Is John the Christ (the Messiah)? John distinguishes himself from the One who is coming by indicating that He (the Messiah) will not only baptize with water, but with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Jewish people generally viewed the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of prophecy and the Spirit that purified God’s people from un-holiness. At Jesus’ baptism the Holy Spirit descended upon him as a sign that He is the One!

Dive On In... the Water’s Fine!

Science teaches us that life is dependent upon water. Soil, sun, and seed can all be present; but without water, nothing germinates... grows... bears fruit... nourishes. It is a life-giving element that sustains our world and us.

It’s no surprise that God uses water to reveal this same principle about His spirit. Like a river, it provides direction and movement in our lives. God’s spirit purifies and cleanses. In barren, dry places, God’s spirit penetrates the soil of our hearts causing the seed of His Word to germinate and bear fruit. In baptism, we follow the example of Jesus in opening our lives to God’s spirit; and in so doing, revealing transformed hearts and lives made pleasing to God.

Prayer:

Holy God, you have given me spiritual birth in the waters of baptism. Renew in me daily the birth of your spirit in heart and home. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

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

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 62:1-5 - This passage reminds us that God has the final say. Though scorned, God will continue to work on Jerusalem's behalf until the rest of the world sees her glory fully revealed. The city will be called by a new name. In the ancient Near East, names often signified one's anticipated or present character. Jerusalem having a new name means it will have a new, righteous character. Like a crown adorning one's head so Jerusalem will be an adornment to the LORD. She will display His splendor, that is, her inhabitants will manifest God's character in their conduct.

1 Corinthians 12:1-11 - Just as God desires for Jerusalem to be an adornment to the world, we too must reflect God's splendor. Contention and strife often interrupt that objective. Paul's words are written to a Church that is experiencing division. His words serve to remind them (and us) of what we have in common, not to focus on what divides us. He reminds us:

- 1) There is "one Lord" and we belong to the same living Lord (1-3)
- 2) We depend on the same God (4-6)
- 3) We minister to the same body (7-11)

John 2:1-11 - Jesus' first miracle recorded by John took place at a wedding. It is a manifestation of Christ's glory. In contrast to Moses turning the water into blood as a sign of God's judgment (Ex. 7:14-24), Jesus' transformation of the water to wine reveals Jesus as the Word in the flesh, the mighty Creator.

The public at large did not witness Jesus' first miracle, just those individuals at the wedding. The splendor of His glory is often witnessed in the personal transformation of our lives.

It's Personal

Water. Wine. Marriage. These are the makings of the Sacraments – personal and transformative. They are symbols of God's desire to intersect and transform the ordinary with divinity.

It's revealing that Jesus chose a wedding party as the place to perform his first miracle. Jesus revealed His glory in the midst of a celebration of union and intimacy. The miracle he performed was personal... meaningful... joyful. The same is true in our own lives. God graces us with the gift of His presence so His glory can be revealed and worshipped – by us and others.

Prayer:

Almighty God, illuminate and transform my life with your Spirit. Shine in and through me, causing others to know and worship you. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

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

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 - It is a happy occasion when people -- eager to hear and be taught God's Word -- have a teacher to meet their need. At the people's request, Ezra brings out the scroll of the Law. This passage reveals an attitude that allows God's word to have its maximum impact on our lives. The people: 1) Had a hunger for God's Word; 2) A belief that the Word of the LORD is important for the whole community; 3) A reverent expectancy that by listening and being taught they would receive benefit from the Word; 4) A deep respect for God's Word; and 5) A desire to understand God's Word.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a- Unity without diversity yields uniformity. Over time, uniformity tends to produce death. Paul uses the analogy of the body to show the importance of diversity -- many parts, but the same body. Without sufficient diversity, the body cannot function the way God desires. It ceases to be healthy. Though there are many (diverse) members ... there is only one body.

Luke 4:14-21 - It was the custom in the synagogue for a man to stand while he was reading the Scriptures but then to sit while explaining the portion he had read. The portion of Scripture Jesus read was Isaiah 61:1-2, a messianic passage.

When Jesus concluded His reading with the words, "... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor," He stopped mid-verse without reading the next line that speaks of God's vengeance. Jesus added, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." The implication was clear. Jesus was claiming to be the Messiah who would bring the kingdom of God -- but His First Advent was not His time for judgment. Jesus' words plainly stated that the offer of the favorable year of the Lord (i.e., the kingdom time) was being made to them through Him (v. 21)

Good News!

Notice how those words cause us to perk up with expectancy. When someone tells us they have good news, we stand a little taller... sit a bit straighter... listen more attentively. It's true in our personal lives and true of our collective culture.

We long for good news. And in the midst of a darkened world filled with crises and chaos, Jesus appears -- revealing the good news of His salvation. To the poor He gives affirmation and purpose. To the blind and sick He offers sight and healing. His good news is both personal and powerful -- revealing His glory in the broken places of our lives. And that's good news indeed!

Prayer:

Gracious God, you offer good news through the Gospel of Jesus. Let my life reflect your salvation and let others experience your Good News through me. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

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

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.

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

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Jeremiah 1:4-10 - When Jeremiah heard the call of God, he saw the wickedness around him and the weakness within him. When he saw his inadequacy – like us – he concluded: “I’m not cut out for this job.” Despite his objections (“I am only a boy”), the foreknowledge of Lord had anticipated his objection.

Just as Jeremiah had been brought to this hour for this purpose, God’s has a purpose for our life.

Corinthians 13:1-13h 1:4-10 - The context in which Paul writes this “love chapter” is centered in the strife and conflict surrounding the questions of spiritual gifts. His focus is to point his audience’s attention to the reality that gifts without graces are nothing! As wonderful as miraculous gifts are... the fruit of the Spirit is more important.

Luke 4:21-30 - It was customary in synagogue settings to ask visiting rabbis to read the Scripture lesson and make appropriate comments pertaining to the Scripture. The popularity of Jesus had grown, so it was natural that the synagogue leader asked Him to read the appointed lesson for the day.

What was startling was that Jesus pronounced that the Scriptures were fulfilled in Him; that He would minister to needy people and bring the salvation of the Lord. This enraged those who heard him. They desired to kill him.

Yes You Can!

I’m worthless. I don’t have the proper education or training. I’m too young... too old. No one thinks I’m capable – neither do I. If you’ve ever thought or said something similar, today’s readings are for you!

In his own power, young Jeremiah didn’t know what or how to say what God commanded. None of us can bear all things, believe all things, hope in all things, endure all things in our own strength. Even Jesus was misunderstood and mistreated, met with rage and disbelief. That’s the point of today’s readings.

When God reveals himself to us, He also makes known His strength, wisdom, and grace in us. He gives us His words to speak, His love to demonstrate, His compassion for those around us. With God – and in God – all things are possible!.

Prayer:

Almighty God, in mercy you rule all things in heaven and earth. Through Jesus Christ, reign over my life, making His peace and presence known. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

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Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 6:1-8, (9-13) - Though the nation had prospered materially, it was in terrible condition spiritually. God shifts Isaiah's eyes from himself and his people to the throne of heaven, where he sees the splendor of the Lord (6:1-4). A true vision of God and His holiness always makes us realize our own sinfulness. As a result, Isaiah looks inward. What he saw moved him to a confession of sins.

Isaiah is no longer discouraged, because God is on the throne. He is no longer burdened by sin because he has been cleansed. He is now ready to proclaim God's message to the people.

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 - The Greeks did not believe in the resurrection of Christ. Their philosophers taught that the body was the prison of the soul, and the sooner the soul was set free in death, the better off a person would be.

Paul begins his argument for the resurrection of the human body by appealing to the historic witness of the resurrection of Jesus, stressing that without the resurrection there could be no salvation (a dead Savior can save nobody!). If the dead rise not, then Christ is dead, and that Gospel was a lie! The Christian faith is good only if a person lives; there is no hope after death.

Luke 5:1-11 - Fishermen know how to work together, they do not give up easily, they have courage, and they labor diligently. These are ideal qualities for disciples of Jesus Christ. The fact that the men were planning to go out again after washing their nets is proof that they were not dismayed by a night of failure.

Peter was humbled, not by his night of failure but by his astounding success; this is a mark of real character. If success humbles you, then failure will build you up. If success puffs you up, then failure will destroy you. By faith, the men left all and followed Christ. They had been catching living fish and, when they caught them, the fish died. Now they would catch dead fish—sinners—and the fish would live!

Following Hope

When God is revealed, we cannot help but be humbled. All we can see is our sin... failure... inability. But looking into the face of Jesus, we see salvation. In him sin is blotted out and we are made complete. This Hope causes us to leave everything and follow the source of our freedom.

Prayer:

Gracious God, through your Son Jesus Christ you have freed me from sin. Free me also to live out with grace the abundant life I have in him. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

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Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Jeremiah 17:5-10 - Wisdom literature typically contrasts two ways of life. On the one hand, you have a foolish way of talking, living, thinking or worshipping. Contrasted with the wise way to talk, live, think or worship. In this passage, Jeremiah employs a bit of wisdom literature's style and function. A stark contrast is made between two types of people. The first is the man who trusts in his flesh. After verses 1-5 in chapter 17, it isn't difficult to see Jeremiah is calling Judah the foolish "man." They have chosen their way and worshiped other gods. Their punishment is coming. While literally, it will mean exile, figuratively it will look like being cursed. The curse will mean dwelling in a fruitless place, with no hope of production.

The "man" or people who trust the Lord, however, will be blessed. They will abide in a lush environment with water and health. The heat and drought will not affect him.

He finishes with this statement, "I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds."

Jeremiah wants his readers to understand the Lord will be the one who searches and judges the hearts and actions of his people and he will reward them with blessings or curses as he sees fit.

1 Corinthians 15:12-20 - Major events in life tend to be markers, signposts or turning points. They set up a pathway on which everything turns. Things like death, birth, weddings, injuries, job loss, winning the lottery or other major events cause a fork in the road. Nothing is the same after them.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the fork in the road on which all of human history turns.

It is a bold statement, but that is what Paul is saying.

Without the resurrection, death, sin, hell and the powers of the world still reign. Some believe they still do, even after Jesus rose. They limit the power of the Gospel and make what God in Christ a shoulder shrug. They misrepresent God. To be sure, you can't make resurrection insignificant. If it did happen, then nothing is the same. Death, sin, and hell have been broken, and Jesus is the Lord and King of ALL. He can't hold another title no matter what you do with him.

This event changes everything. It shakes our worldviews and questions all we believe. Resurrection isn't an option for what happened to Jesus. It is what happened, and we have the joy and privilege of living in the light and truth of God's work through Christ.

Luke 6:17-26 - Luke records Jesus teaching to two different sets of people. The first is the crowds, who like to follow him around, like what he is doing and want to hear what he says. The second is to the disciples. They are part of the crowds to be sure, but there is more. He has chosen this group of people, 12 of them, suspiciously like the 12 tribes of Israel, to go a little deeper and represent him differently. To them, he gives the Beatitudes. These are the bedrock of the New Kingdom he is establishing. They flip the world upside down and shake it to the core. Those who are poor, hungry, mournful and persecuted are blessed? That makes no earthly sense. Woes, or warnings, are given to the rich, the full, the laughing and those who are spoken well of. Why, because a day is coming when those things will end.

In the new Kingdom, where healing is the norm, priorities are different. These priorities are given to the disciples who will live them out in front of the crowds, their family, and friends. They have successfully carried throughout the generations to you and me. We are now called to embody these priorities and help the world to see there is another Kingdom at work, one in which the marginalized and outcast have a place, just like we do.

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (continued)

A Living Gospel

Every day we face a number of choices. Each choice reflects our desires and priorities, sometimes in ways, we may not like. I heard it said, “I can tell you what you love by looking at your bank transactions.” Ouch. Where we spend our time, energy and money reflect our priorities. Each decision means something whether we like it or not. While the full weight of our choices may not be felt immediately, they will have an impact.

God works the same way. He doesn’t force us this way or that. He allows us to choose how to think, live, eat, dream and even worship. He knows full well the results that may occur as his people have wayward hearts and minds. However, as he has shown us in Christ, there is another way. We don’t have to be slaves to our culture or slaves to our physical impulses. We can learn to think with a Kingdom mind and have Kingdom priorities. As we find the joy and freedom intended, we reflect what God and his Kingdom are like. We invite others to participate in this Kingdom by our words and actions. Those who lead lives governed by Christ and his resurrection, point to a different way of living. This way is full of blessing and lavish love. It makes the cultures way of life blush with shame. They simply can’t be compared, and when laid open for all to see, the choice between the two is easy. And the impact of choosing the Kingdom of Christ will be felt for generations to come, not just in our lives but also in the lives of those around us.

Prayer:

Gracious God, empower me to walk and live by Your Spirit, pleasing You in both word and deed. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

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

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany

Genesis 45:3-11, 15- Joseph has been down a very long road. He places himself and each place he has been squarely at the feet of God. From favored son to the bottom of a well, slavery, honor, false accusation, prison to the second in command, Joseph has remained faithful and obedient. He has held tightly to God's promise, even though his circumstances didn't reflect their eventuality. "So it was not you who sent me here, but God."

Recognizing God as the author of our lives takes a great deal of faith. We aren't called to simply lay idly by and claim all is God's will, but with each new step, each circumstance, pursue faithfulness and obedience to God. This is what Joseph did, even in the worst, unfair circumstances and God used him. He used him to save an entire people group. Who knows why we experience the circumstances we do? Sometimes it feels pretty straightforward, poor choices or mean spirited people seem to account for some. However, we would do well to remember the God of Joseph and trust that he knows what he is doing. All we need to do is remain faithful and obedient to him.

1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50- Gnosticism is the belief in secret knowledge and a duality in the universe. The idea, simply put, says that material things are evil and spiritual things are good. On the surface, Paul sounds like a Gnostic in this passage. Could it be? It is highly unlikely. Jews didn't view the world that way, so what is Paul getting at? Is there really a sense that spiritual things are good and physical things are bad?

Resurrection is a tricky concept. It isn't simply that we receive new bodies without reference to the old ones. It also isn't that our dead bodies are re-animated like spiritual zombies. It is a new way of being human altogether. Resurrection shatters molds and joins heaven and earth in a way like nothing we have experienced. It requires death.

This uncomfortable truth Paul makes clear, "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies." In the same way, Jesus's body was new; we too will receive new bodies. Are they just spirit? Apparently not, others Jesus eating fish and having people touch him wouldn't make sense. If the physical world is evil, why would Jesus have a physical body after the resurrection? Are they the same bodies we had only better? No, because there is a different quality to Jesus after the resurrection.

Paul wants the Corinthians to see that physical, bodily resurrection is their hope, and in it, both spirit and flesh are one in a new way. Fueled differently, with different qualities, but somehow made of the same stuff.

Why does it matter? God is making all things new in Jesus Christ. Our lives now, corruptible and given to decay, will die. This death will lead to a new way of being human, in a new heaven and a new earth where we can fully express the kingdom of God in a way we can only do in part today.

Luke 6:27-38 - Luke records what may be one of the most important passages of Scripture for followers of Jesus. In these verses, we get clear, unequivocal directions about what we are to 'do' as Christians. While this is definitely the narrow way, it is the way Jesus calls those who would be his to pursue.

Love is for people we don't like and don't agree with. It is to govern every relationship we have. Judgment and condemnation are his, not ours to dole out. Our role is to love people, even our enemies. We are called to lend without expectation of return. God has enough for us and will reward us as we love and lend. He is the one looking out for us; we don't have to look out for our best interests. He has already done that, and he has called us to love. Loving is in our best interest and the best interest of everyone around us.

A Living Gospel

In the Western world, Christianity has enjoyed top billing among belief systems. In fact, the Christian worldview had dominated Western culture for the better part of 1500 years. Today in the West, we live in a post-Christian world. Christianity is not the dominant world view and may not even hold second place!

While many mourn this trend, and hope to return to a time when being a Christian didn't mean outcast or idiot, the

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany (continued)

shift is likely permanent.

For those in the 1st Century, Christianity wasn't even world view. By most accounts, it was seen as a weird Jewish cult not worthy of note. How did it climb from obscurity? The truth of the resurrection and the love Christians displayed.

Jesus bodily resurrection started a new age. It is the point on which all of human history turns. Death doesn't rule. Sin is not the slave master. Hell needn't be feared. There is new life in Christ, and by His Spirit, Christians can live out the life he has called us to live.

That life is a life of love. If Christians occupy their hearts and minds around loving their neighbors and enemies, they will be the talk of the town! The new life Christ inaugurated would be felt, seen, smelled and embraced. People would run to the Church to answer life's big questions, and while Christianity may not return to its lofty status, it would surely be a place of healing and peace for those around us. All it requires is faithfulness and obedience to Christ's call to love.

Prayer:

God of every land and nation you have created all people and you dwell among us in Jesus Christ.

Listen to the cries of those who pray to you, and grant that, as we proclaim the greatness of your name, all people will know the power of love at work in the world. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 55:10-13- The intent of God's word, written, spoken, read or studied, is to not just reside in our minds but in our hearts as well. To be sure, God's word introduces new ideas and thoughts, but it is far more than that. When it has the opportunity, it moves beyond our minds and thoughts to our hearts. Once there, it gives birth in our thoughts, our mouths, hands, and feet. Our lives look completely different, much the way an unprepared field looks compared to an orchard brimming with fruit.

Many come to see the beauty of an orchard, enjoy its shade and eat its fruit. Some, even take seeds to plant their own trees or create their own orchard.

So it is with God's word. It has a much greater impact than we can imagine and if we participate with Christ and His spirit, it will give birth in and through us in ways we could only imagine. Others will see it in us and long for what we have, what we know and for the God we love.

1 Corinthians 15:51-58 - There will be a transformation... not just a changing of clothes, but a changing of the stuff we are made of. It will be us, but different. Decay and death will hold no sway over us. Goodbye to aging! The resurrection will happen in a moment, like a trumpet blast, but the age in which it will come has been inaugurated by the resurrection of Jesus. He has started the redemption of the cosmos. The Kingdom of God has been established and will continue its reign over sin and death, climaxing in the resurrection.

So what about now?

Eternal life begins for us the moment we say "Yes" to Jesus. We live in, participate in, invite others into this new way of being human. Free from sin's chains, our lives look different, and we can, by our very lives, point the way to hope.

Luke 6:39-49 - Life has a way of helping us see what is true. This happens mostly through difficulty and pain. These challenges have a way of stripping away the things we prop up and hide behind so no one can see what is actually happening.

Jesus uses real world examples to demonstrate this. Hypocrisy is evident because you become what you follow. If you are blind, you will not gain sight by following a blind man. Further, a tree is known by its fruit. Not only are there particular trees, like apple, orange, and others, but trees are also known as good or bad based on whether they produce good fruit or not. People are no different.

Despite what we may do to cover up what is happening in our hearts or minds, we can't produce something we aren't. Evil people create evil, and it will be revealed when difficulty comes. Jesus talks about the rain coming, like genuinely challenging life issues. Things like cancer, death, severe disappointment, catastrophes and other "rain" happen to us. They tend to reveal what is under the surface or what our foundations are made of.

Jesus says the way to ensure we are not hypocrites, blind, produce bad fruit, evil or foolish, we must put into practice, not just hear what he says.

Doing what Jesus says, is like building a foundation, one step or stone at a time. With patience and focus, when the rains come, they will reveal a solid foundation based on faith in Christ and his teaching.

A Living Gospel

Being a Christian is an extraordinary privilege. Our culture may say otherwise, and even our churches may not talk about it this way, but the Scriptures make this clear. Not only are we forgiven, blessed, chosen, adopted (See Ephesians 1 and 2), but our lives really matter.

What we do, say and think really matter. They matter now, and they have an eternal impact. This is the profound privilege.

Jesus says to practice his teaching is to reveal wisdom. There isn't much wisdom around us so to have examples and

Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany (continued)

places we can go to see it and feel it is rare. We are to be that 'sign of wisdom.' Our lives show another way. As God's word is poured out in our hearts and minds, it produces something in and through us. We are transformed, but more than that, we change our environments and give an opportunity for others to see a different way.

Our friends, family, neighbors, those without hope and even our enemies can see the fruit we produce. They can sit in the shade and security of the orchard God creates in and through us. They can eat the fruit and enjoy peace as the rains come. And, with time and patience, they can follow Jesus and his teaching, creating a firm foundation to last through storms and providing a way of hope for those around them!

Being a Christian isn't about sin management, it is a great privilege to carry on the message of the Gospel and the work of God in this world!

Prayer:

Perfect Light of revelation, as You shone in the life of Jesus whose epiphany we celebrate, so shine in us and through us that we may become beacons of truth and compassion enlightening all creation with deeds of justice and mercy. Amen.

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

Ninth Sunday after the Epiphany

1 Kings 8:22-23-41-43- Solomon follows through on his plan to build the Temple after his father, King David, didn't receive the honor. At the pinnacle of the project, the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place of the Temple.

He prays that the Temple would function as a reminder of Israel's God and His willingness to hear the cries of people who call upon him. Those outside the faith will no doubt have heard of God's work and the incredible ways in which he has moved on behalf of Israel and call out to him. Solomon asks that, when it happens, God would hear and answer their cries.

Why would he want that?

The Temple exists so that people would know God the way the Israelites know him. The point of having a dwelling place for God is to give people a place to come and receive from him. The Temple was to be a beacon and gathering place for Jews first, but also for the Gentile.

Galatians 1:1-12 - Galatia is a region in what is today, central Turkey. It was Turkish, under Roman rule with Jews and Greeks present. Paul would have known the area well as his home town was just to the East of the area. He wrote this letter to the churches in the area.

During most of his ministry, Paul had to fight a two-front battle for hearts and minds. On the one hand, the Jews and Jewish Christians. On the other hand, Gentiles, and Gentile Christians. These groups were not overly fond of one another and had to overcome enormous barriers to becoming one in Christ. It was common for people to come behind Paul and twist his teaching or refute it all together. This resulted in the uprooting of many young in the faith. Primarily, they attacked his credibility and teaching.

In his opening statement, Paul makes a couple of things clear.

- Paul is an Apostle. A claim made by one who was taught by Jesus himself.
- His message is the true Gospel. It has to do with grace, and if anyone preaches anything different, they should be cursed.

This is the message he received and believed. It came to him on the road to Damascus, and its message will not suffer dilution by anyone or anything. It has the power to bring together both Jews and Gentiles, heal, forgive and transform lives like Paul's. Turning away from it, for any reason, makes it less than what it is; The Good News.

Luke 7:1-10 - No one was happy to have Rome ruling in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. They were an unwelcome occupying army. The soldiers, without a war to fight, frequently became "policeman-like." Locals would know certain soldiers and vice versa. They could be known for their kindness or more often than not, for their cruelty.

In this story, Luke records Jesus' interaction with a well-liked Centurion, who had even gone so far as to build a local synagogue. In many eyes, this made him worthy of receiving a miracle Jesus could perform.

As the story goes, the Centurion's servant was sick and "at the point of death." The elders tried to convince Jesus of his worthiness, but the Centurion displays faith in a way that people still talk about 2000 years later!

Understanding authority and Chain of Command, the Centurion states Jesus doesn't need to come to his home (he recognizes he isn't worthy to have Jesus visit) but he only needs to "give the command" for healing, and it will happen. Jesus marvels as this, and when the elders return to the Centurion, they find the servant healed.

This man, who is from the wrong place, works for the wrong company and has the wrong last name has faith that is rewarded in healing. His faith didn't come through Judaism (although he appears to have been sympathetic), but through hearing stories and believing.

We often trust in evidence to believe. This man didn't and despite his heritage, provides a faith-filled example for us to follow when we call upon Jesus.

Ninth Sunday after the Epiphany (continued)

A Living Gospel

We frequently worship in communities that look just like us. Whether predominately white, black, Hispanic, Asian, middle-class, young or old, democrat or republican, each of us gravitates towards those who look, think and act like us.

It can come as quite a surprise when we find faith in those different than we are. You can see this in the Scriptures as the Gospel spreads in the book of acts and the various communities are born, sometimes without much teaching from one of the Apostles.

It was always God's intention that his people, those who have faith in him, would be a beacon for the world around them. From Israel and her neighbors to you and me living our lives today, God has a heart for the 'others.' The Gospel is too big for just one people group! The Good News that Jesus is Lord is for all people, at all times in every place. He is Lord over every aspect of life and beyond as he defeated sin and death.

We should not be surprised then when we find faith in those different from us. Maybe they speak, dance, look and worship differently, but belief in Jesus as Lord is faith in Jesus!

We can have confidence knowing the Gospel is bigger than us and what we are like. It crosses culture and time. It penetrates the greatest minds and coldest hearts, and as we embrace his Grace and Mercy for us, we can be that city set on a hill, proclaiming our faith and his greatness to a world in desperate need.

Prayer:

O God, you spoke your word and revealed your good news in Jesus, the Christ.

Fill all creation with that word again, so that by proclaiming your joyful promises to all nations and singing of your glorious hope to all peoples, we may become one living body, your incarnate presence on the earth. Amen.

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

Transfiguration Sunday, (Last Sunday before Lent all years)

Exodus 34:29-35 - The glory of the Old Testament Law was temporary and finally faded away, but the glory of new covenant grace grows brighter and brighter. Moses only reflected God's glory and had to wear a veil so the people could not see the glory disappear, but God's people today radiate God's glory from within as they see Jesus Christ in the Word (the mirror) and become more like Him (2 Cor. 3:18). Ours is to be a constant "transfiguration" experience as we walk with the Lord. ("Transformed" in Rom. 12:2, and "changed" in 2 Cor. 3:18 are both the Greek word "transfigured" as used in Matt. 17:2).¹

2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2 - Paul identifies that we are sinners, warped and twisted out of shape, far from being the persons we want to be – or that God intends us to be. However, God is in the process of working His transformation in us; we "are being transformed into His likeness with ever increasing glory" (3:18).

To Paul, the implications of these truths were compelling. As a leader, called to be an example, Paul had to take the veil off his life and personality, and let others see him as he really was. Just as the Corinthians – and us – Paul's transformation was also incomplete. He understood that because Christ was working the transformation in him, others would see the glory of the Lord.

Luke 9:28-36, (37-43a) - Peter was a saved man, but he knew little about discipleship, taking up a cross, and following Jesus. Salvation is God's gift to us because Jesus died for us on the cross. Discipleship is our gift to Him as we take up our cross, die to self, and follow the Lord in everything.

On the mount of transfiguration, the three chosen disciples learned that suffering leads to glory, a message Peter emphasizes in his first epistle (1:6–8, 11; 4:12–5:10). Moses represents the Law and Elijah the Prophets, both of whom find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1–3). As Moses led the Jews out of the bondage of Egypt, so Jesus leads believing sinners out of their bondage to sin.

Traveling Mercies

We all need the reminder that life is not about the destination but the journey. Our trouble is that we tend to focus on the destination. We want to arrive. We want to experience the culmination of our planning and effort. Peter was no different. He saw the physical transfiguration of Jesus, saw Moses and Elijah, heard the voice of God, and thought, "This is it! We've arrived! We can stop and set up camp right here!"

Mountain top experiences – epiphanies – offer this same temptation to us. We gaze in wonder at where we've been and celebrate with joy where God has led us and we're tempted to stop there. But, like Peter, we need to turn our face and set our gaze on what lies ahead. Looking forward, we see Jerusalem, the pain of Gethsemane, and another mountain marked by a cross. But off in the distance, there's a light shining – God's final Epiphany when His Son is fully revealed as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Enjoy fully the wonder of Epiphany; then travel on – Christ is waiting up ahead with mercy to grace the rest of the journey!

Prayer:

Almighty God, you revealed the glory of your Son on a holy mountain. Reveal His glory in my own life and lead me by His light. Blessed be God forever. Amen.

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

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993), Ex 32:1.