

Focus: The Good News is God reveals himself to us in many ways, and each of us responds in a different way to God's call.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

An “epiphany” is a discovery or understanding. It is, if you will, to become aware of something that was previously unknown. In the context of the church year, the day of the Epiphany celebrates the making known of the Christ Child to the Gentiles—or, more specifically, the three Wise Men, as representatives of the Gentiles. Throughout the remaining Sundays of the Epiphany season, then, our lectionary leads us through events in Scripture through which God becomes known to the people. Today is no exception.

The Old Testament lesson is one of my personal favorites. Last week, we heard about how Jeremiah, who protested that he was “just a boy,” and thus unsuited to be a messenger of God, was called to be a prophet anyway. This morning, we hear Isaiah tell of his call to be a prophet. Isaiah was rightly frightened to be in the presence of the Most High. You see, it was understood in his day as it is even in some circles today that a human being just couldn't look at the face of God and expect to survive. God just didn't make himself visible to creation in that way. Add to that the awesomeness of what Isaiah *did* see and one can quickly see how overwhelming it was.

The images are quite vivid. Isaiah, probably a man of average size for the 8th century before Christ—about five and half feet tall or so—standing in the throne room of God. Surrounding him are these huge figures with three pair of wings, floating in the air before him. These giant figures covered their faces, so as to not look at either Isaiah or the Lord. They also covered their feet. Now, to you and I, it must sound strange to hear that they covered their feet. However, in Isaiah's time, and for centuries before and after, to talk about “covering one's feet” was to actually cover parts of the body which are not properly displayed in public. With the remaining pair of wings, the seraphs—or seraphim in Hebrew—floated in the air. One might imagine that it was possibly windy in that room, with all of those flying figures flapping their wings at once. And then, just when Isaiah expected things to get ugly, one of the seraphs grabs a coal off of the altar and heads directly toward him. Yikes!

Once Isaiah had been purified by the hot coal, he heard the voice of the Lord. “Whom shall I send?” the Lord asks. Now, what kind of question is that? As the little girl in the soda commercial says to the Albert Einstein character, “Du-uh!” Here is Isaiah, scared out of his wits, just having been told that he was now free of guilt and sin. What *else* could happen here? And besides, who else

was around to say “Yes?” Unlike Jeremiah, who protested when asked, Isaiah readily accepted the call to serve the Lord. And what was his reward? Nothing less than telling the people that God was going to make life rough on them. What a pleasant way to being one’s call, isn’t it? Better still, what an epiphany!

In our Gospel, we see an epiphany of a different sort. Jesus is at the shore preaching and teaching. The crowds are gathering, and in time, there is quite a number of people present. Jesus was being crowded into the water, so he asked some of the fishermen to let him use their boat as a floating pulpit, if you will. Now, while Luke doesn’t offer more information, it appears that this request might have been rather common. Perhaps local leaders would gather the people by the lake when they had important announcements, and would talk to them from someone’s boat. In any case, there is no sense that Simon and the others thought this request from Jesus was unusual. Besides, they probably expected Jesus to give them some money as a rental fee. That would be welcomed, especially since they caught no fish that day.

So, when Jesus was done teaching, rather than giving them any money, he told Simon to toss his nets into the deep water—where they would normally do so when fishing. Simon, whom we know later will be called Peter, was thrilled with that idea at all. “What do you mean, “Toss the nets in the water”? Can’t you see that all the work we did before you got on the boat did us no good?” But dear Simon did as Jesus asked. And lo and behold, the nets were filled with fish! Overflowing with fish to the point they had to call other fishermen to lend a hand, and even then they had too many fish. In an instant, Jesus had offered a sign to Simon and the others that Jesus was different than other teachers. And Simon realizes this, too, and call Jesus “Lord,” just as Isaiah called the Most High when standing before the altar, and Simon, like Isaiah, called himself a sinful man. And just as Isaiah was reassured that all would be OK, so too was Simon reassured.

“Do not be afraid,” Jesus says. These are the same words that the angel says to Zechariah when he is told that Elizabeth will bear a son, and the same words Gabriel says to Mary when she is told she will give birth to the Son of God. These are also the words of the angels to the shepherds in the hills outside Bethlehem when they are told of the birth of Jesus. “Do not be afraid” is a common expression used when someone is about to hear a message from the Lord, of from a messenger of the Lord. And often times, those to whom these words are directed are about to be called to do work for the Lord. They are words that often precede an epiphany to the hearer.

And what was the work for the hearer? Well, Isaiah left what he was doing to be the prophet of God to the Israelites. Zechariah became the silent witness to

the power of God, only to receive his voice again when he wrote the name of his newborn son on a piece of slate. Mary became pregnant out of wedlock, and nearly lost everything—including her fiancée and, under the Law, her life. Simon, with James and John left all they had—their boat and possessions—to follow this teacher named Jesus. What wonderful examples these are for us.

Wonderful examples? You must be kidding, Pastor. Yes, my friends, these are wonderful examples for us. Not every one of us will be called upon to “drop everything” and become a prophet or apostle. Certainly it’s unlikely any of us would be asked to bear a child who would become a prophet. But we can, and are, still called to serve the Lord God, and we should not take the words “Do not be afraid” lightly. At the same time, we shouldn’t take the call to service lightly, either. There is no need to fear serving the Lord. Oh yes, there are many who have been punished, even martyred, in service to the Lord. But there are even more who have served in a variety of ways when called upon to do so.

In baptism, we are liberated, from sin and death as we join in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this simple, yet most holy act, we are cleansed—just as the hot coal touched the lips of Isaiah and cleansed him from sin, too. We are called into the family of God as sisters and brothers of Christ. And because we are God’s children, we have no reason to fear death, for death has been overcome in Christ’s victory over death in his resurrection. This is *exactly* the Good News of which Paul reminds the Corinthians in his first letter to them. There is nothing to fear, for Christ has died for our sins once and for all, and on the third day was resurrected. It is God’s grace which redeems us, that is, which makes us right with God. Do not be afraid.

Do not be afraid to respond to the call to serve. You might not feel you are called to serve the church full time as a pastor or rostered lay leader, and that is fine. Each of us is called, however, to some calling, or as Luther would have said, to a *vocatio*, or vocation. Some are called to be students, at least for a time. Others are called to be parents or grandparents. Others still are called to be teachers, scientists, technicians, medical professionals, or a host of other much-needed vocations. Do not be afraid to answer those calls, either. Those calls are just as real and valid as a call to a vocation in the church. Your vocation is your calling.

Do not be afraid to a call to service in the church, either. We have much work to do here, and every one of us plays an important role. In the weeks and months ahead, many of you will be asked to consider serving the church in various ways—teaching a class, planning an event, serving on a committee or task force. When you are asked, know that it is after much prayer and

discussion that you are being asked to consider serving in a particular task. Please, take the time to prayerfully consider the call to serve, and then respond as the Holy Spirit leads you. Service to the church—regardless of the size of the task—is important. No one person can do everything, but as we each do a little part, the Body of Christ is strengthened, and no one need feel she or he is leaving the boat on the shore.

In ancient days, God revealed himself to the people through the prophets—Jeremiah, Isaiah, Elijah, and the others. But now, in these last days, God reveals himself to us through his Son. Let us give thanks to the Lord for each epiphany. Amen.