

Epiphany 4

January 29, 2023



PROCLAMATION POINTS

The following are some thoughts and questions to be used for a text study on the weekly lessons, or for jump-starting the imagination of the preacher and hearer in preparing for the proclamation event.

(God) is now reminding them of past blessings— first, the rescue from the wretched slavery of Egypt. He wanted to show them this external example as a sign to admonish them to remember divine goodness. He has given us, too, those external signs of grace, Baptism and the Eucharist, by which He encourages us to remember those things which have happened to us through the gospel.

– Martin Luther –

First Lesson: Micah 6:1–8

In this lesson, the prophet Micah relays a message to Israel that God has a problem with them. A controversy of sorts is brewing between God and his people. The language is like a court case where God insists the people make their defense before him. Let the jury of the hills and mountains decide the peoples' fate!

God asks the question, “What have I done to you?” God demands an answer as he makes his own case, saying: I brought you out of Egypt; I bought you back from the slave owners; I showed you my righteousness! For their part, the people seem to be baffled by what God could possibly expect of them. They speak as if he has placed before them a host of impossible demands – burnt offerings, thousands of rams, ten thousands of rivers of oil, firstborn children.

But all of these demands are imagined by the people. They bear no resemblance to what God actually demands. The prophet reminded the people what is required of them in this relationship: do justice, love kindness and, walk humbly with your God.

- *Have you ever demanded an answer of someone who wronged you? What sort of response were you looking for from your transgressor? What do you think God is looking for from us?*
- *What are some ways we continue to imagine that God makes impossible demands of us?*
- *What does it mean to “walk humbly” with the Lord? What does it look like?*

Psalm 15

As with the passage from Isaiah, Psalm 15 offers a glimpse into what God expects of his people. And again, it has nothing to do with burnt offerings or sacrifices. The psalmist makes clear that God's concern is how his people treat one another. A holy life is not one marked by displays of piety. Rather, it is a life lived for the neighbor – speaking the truth with grace, keeping one's word, not charging interest, not taking bribes. This is the witness of the believer in the world.

- *How is a right relationship with our neighbors related to a right relationship with God?*
- *What makes it possible to live for others?*

Second Lesson: 1 Corinthians 1:18–31

The phrase “stumbling block” (v.23) is the same Greek word from which get our word “scandal.” We are a culture that

loves to watch a juicy scandal unfold on the television. We will curiously watch to see the latest sports hero fall from grace, the most popular actress end up in jail, or the high and mighty politician mess up and ruin his career.

However, when we face scandal in our own lives, we don't like it very much. The last thing we want is to be the center of attention for doing something stupid or ill-advised. We would much rather distance ourselves from the gossip and pain as it unfolds.

- *In what sense is the cross of Christ a scandal? How is the cross offensive or laughable to the world?*
- *In faith, how is the cross an assurance? How does it serve as balm in our pain and suffering?*

Paul says that the wisdom of God is foolishness to the world. Through the media of our own day, we see how often the world portrays those who believe in Jesus as backward, superstitious, and unintelligent. But Paul reminds the church that this foolishness of the cross is the power of God to change the course of human history, to change the lives of all who believe. What is scandalous to the world, a stumbling block to those who do not believe, is the very way that God reveals his love for humanity.

- *Why do we, as Christians, often let the world determine what we consider wise and foolish?*
- *Why does the world's judgment upon us as “fools” bother us instead of bolster us as a badge of honor?*
- *How does this relate to what God says in Isaiah 55:8-9, “My ways are not your ways...” How is this a promise for us?*

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 5:1–12

The temptation when reading the beatitudes is to see them as a project Jesus is laying out before us. If we wish to be blessed we must find our way into one of these blessed categories. In fact, the beatitudes simply are what they present themselves to be – blessings. Jesus is blessing those that the world sees as cursed. Once again the foolishness of God's wisdom is on display. Those who follow Christ can expect to suffer hardship, famine, loneliness and rejection but this is not a sign that they are rejected by God. In the midst of hardship he continues to bless his beloved.

- *In what sense are the greatest blessings of God often revealed under the form of their opposite? Why does God do that?*
- *How does following Christ bring blessings beyond what we could ever imagine?*