



Sunday, January 17, 2021

John 1: 43-51

Second Sunday after Epiphany

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Welcome to this sermon series that our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is providing for congregations throughout the Sundays after Epiphany. I am Larry Kochendorfer and I serve as the Bishop of the Synod of Alberta and the Territories. It is great to be with you this Sunday.

Let us pray:

Come, Holy Spirit, that we may see and taste the grace of God afresh. Come, Holy Spirit, that we might share the grace of God with others. Come, Holy Spirit, that we might bear witness with our whole lives to the grace of God made manifest and available to us in Jesus. Amen.

It was a Thursday. It was a moment so alive that it was almost unbearable. It was so simple really. I had brought our niece, Amanda, who was fifteen at the time, and our youngest son, Jordan, who was then four, over to the church on a Thursday afternoon and while I was in my office returning a couple of telephone calls they were in the sanctuary.

With the phone calls completed I threw on my coat and walked into the sanctuary where I stopped in a moment of epiphany, a moment of revealing, a moment filled with the glory of God – God's presence – wonderful and mysterious.

Amanda was sitting at the piano playing while Jordan was distributing communion to his invisible congregants who were kneeling at the altar rail.

After a moment he saw me standing at the door to the sanctuary and he yelled out to me, "We're playing communion, Dad!"

And I looked at this four-year-old dressed in grey sweats, with a face still partially covered with lunch, and his face glowing with an utterly new discovery. He was sharing communion.

And I saw a glimpse of God's presence, a revelation of God's work – the father, the pastor in me saw, in a fleeting moment, the emerging worshipper, communion sharer, worship leader in our son – something so touching, so incandescent, so alive that it was almost beyond bearing – and I was changed – transformed.

Is it simply too ordinary? Too unsuspecting? Too unexpected? Or is it too wonderful, this moment of clarity, of unveiling, of revealing, of God's presence?

We have entered the season of Epiphany. A season of revealing. Of appearance. Of manifestation. Epiphany: an immediate and meaningful understanding of something. Surprising. Sudden. Profound. Epiphany: an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure. A revelation.

What is revealed in this season is what it means that God became human. That God entered our world, no longer satisfied just to be with us but now is one of us. When that happens, when the incarnation happens, we change too. Our humanity changes. Suddenly, who we see ourselves to be can no longer remain the same because we have seen God in who we are.

We tend to expect that Epiphany is only about the revelation of Jesus. About seeing Jesus, of witnessing Jesus in various revealing moments. It is not supposed to be about being found ourselves.

But John's Gospel invites us to imagine that these can be one and the same. That is, seeing Jesus in those revelatory moments, those unexpected moments is also when you find yourself — who you are, who you are called to be. In those moments of seeing Jesus you realize your identity as a follower, a disciple; and you see a glimpse, perhaps a new glimpse of something you have not seen before when it comes to your own faith story, your own understanding of what it means to be a disciple, your answering of your baptismal call: "follow me."

Maybe this epiphany season might take on a mirror effect. That is, when you hear these texts, when you look for Jesus, when you experience these revelatory moments of Jesus, you simultaneously see something about yourself, and ask what does this mean?

John's Gospel is full of these moments of epiphany, and of what following Jesus will look like.

For this Gospel writer it will mean taking John 3:16 seriously. It will mean taking the witness of the woman at the well seriously. It will mean finding those who have been cast out of communities for their courage to confess their faith in Jesus...like the man born blind (John 9:34). It will mean believing that the Spirit is indeed your very breath as Jesus sends you out into the world (John 20:21-22). It will mean being thrown out yourself (16:2), rejected for insisting that God's love for the world and everyone in it – everyone – is actually true.

The incarnation of Jesus changes everything. The revealing of Jesus changes us. These epiphanies transform people.

Listen to Martin Luther King, Jr., who we will remember tomorrow, and his description of an epiphany and his response in his book, *Stride Toward Freedom*:

I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.

The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for justice, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever." Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.

(Martin Luther King Jr, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, 1st edition [©1958 Harper & Brothers], 124–125.)

Martin Luther King, Jr. was transformed by this epiphany often referred to as his “vision in the kitchen.”

Nathaniel’s epiphany, in which he saw who Jesus was, changed Nathaniel, who, then, proclaimed Jesus as: Rabbi, Son of God, King of Israel.

It was a Thursday – it was a moment so alive that it was almost unbearable....“We’re playing communion Dad!”

I suspect that most of us glimpse these moments of epiphany, of aliveness, of revelation, of unveiling – of God’s presence – the Spirit’s work – in the regular, ordinary patterns of life: in a blinding moment of conversion; in a moment of deepened awareness of the presence of God; in a moment of realizing the truth and call of Christ; in the play ritual of a child; through parents, ever so lovingly, showing a child how to swing a bat; through our children singing “You Are Holy, You are Whole,” “Beautiful Savior,” “O Come All Ye Faithful”; in the hike up a mountain to pray; in a word of absolution; in an act of justice and peace; in a moment of sacramental meeting – when we hear the drops of water drowning and bringing with the Word new life – when the bread in our hands and the wine on our lips suddenly acquires a flavor and a vintage which takes us out of time and out of our human limitations and intoxicates us with God.

As we glimpse God at work, this unveiling, this revelation, this epiphany – we hold it in our heart and we return to life, different, transformed ourselves because for one shining, mysterious moment we have seen.

These glimpses do not evaporate our doubts or tell us what to do next, nothing will be visibly different but beloved people of God, siblings in Christ – it does make a difference to have seen, even for a moment, a taste, a glimpse, something so alive that it is almost beyond bearing, for we return to daily life, back to work, back to ministry, to family, to this time of COVID pandemic. Different, changed, transformed, back to where mission and ministry is engaged, where the love of God is shared, and where grace is gifted.

Where we are invited to live out our baptismal calling, to follow Jesus, in the midst of our daily lives:

*to live among God's faithful people,
to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's supper,
to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,
to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,
and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.*

(Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Affirmation of Baptism. ©2006 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Augsburg Fortress, p. 236.)

Epiphany is a short season. Expect to discover many things about Jesus. And in the process, anticipate learning something about yourself. Sometimes the change is monumental. Sometimes incremental. Either way, something will happen. Something epiphanous!

Let us pray:

Into your hands, almighty God, we place ourselves: our minds to know you, our hearts to love you, our wills to serve you, for we are yours.

Into your hands, incarnate Savior, we place ourselves: receive us and draw us after you, that we may follow your steps; abide in us and enliven us by the power of your indwelling.

Into your hands, O hovering Spirit, we place ourselves: take us and fashion us after your image; let your comfort strengthen, your grace renew, and your fire cleanse us, soul and body, in life and in death, in this world of shadows and in your changeless world of light eternal, now and forever. Amen.

(Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Additional Prayers – Commitment. ©2006 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Augsburg Fortress, p. 86.)

Resources in the shaping of today's sermon:

"An Epiphany Way of Life." January 7, 2018 Karoline Lewis

<https://paul17.luthersem.edu/craft.aspx?post=5040>

"Come and See." January 12, 2015 David Lose

<https://www.davidlose.net/2015/01/epiphany-2-b/>

Commentary on John 1:43-51. January 14, 2018 Jan Schnell Rippentrop

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/second-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-john-143-51-4>

"Epiphany Expectations." January 11, 2015 Karoline Lewis

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/epiphany-expectations>

Evangelical Lutheran Worship. ©2006 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Augsburg Fortress.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 1 Advent through Transfiguration. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors. ©2008 Westminster John Knox Press.

John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries. Karoline Lewis ©2014 Fortress Press.

Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story. Martin Luther King Jr. 1st edition ©1958 Harper & Brothers.