

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Epiphany – January 14, 2024
Preached at Saint Aidan’s Episcopal Church, Portland, Oregon
1 Samuel 3:1-10; Ps. 139:1-5, 12-17; 1 Cor. 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

God’s Son—our Savior Jesus Christ—is the light of the world! That is the theme of Epiphany that we proclaimed in the Collect of the Day. There we asked to be “illuminated” by the Word of God, so that we also “may shine with the radiance of Christ’s glory.” In this prayer we are giving voice to our desire to share in the Lord’s Epiphany, that “showing forth” or “manifestation” of God’s redemptive work in the world.

We do not just look to God as the One who will bring us fulfillment in the future; God also calls to us in the present, in the very midst of our lives. Wherever we are, we are summoned to come to self-knowledge, to recognize the destructiveness in ourselves and to turn away from the paralyzing past and enter actively and creatively into the goal God has for all humanity.

So, where do we begin? First we need to listen more closely to the Word of the Lord which can illumine our lives, the Word which calls forth in us the compassion, the vision and the action so needed in our fragmented world. But it is not always easy to hear when God is calling us, or even to recognize God’s voice.

The prophet Samuel had the same problem. In the first lesson this morning, the boy Samuel is addressed by the Lord three times. Each time Samuel thinks that it is his mentor, Eli, calling him. Finally it is Eli who realizes that it must be the Lord who is speaking, so he tells Samuel to be ready to hear the prophetic word which will be spoken to him.

The Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Corinthians that we “were bought with a price,” a reminder that Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection disclosed God’s desire to redeem and save us all. It is this saving action that leads us to acknowledge that we truly belong to God. Deep down, beneath the details of our various lives, we are connected because we all belong to God. Our bodies, our minds, our souls—our entire lives belong to God.

And yet, we have not arrived where God means for us to be. We are only now *becoming* what we are meant to be. If we were already the lights of the world, we would not have to pray that we *become* illumined by the Word of God. Maybe the bond is not strong enough or the current not steady enough or the relationship to God not deep enough for us to be where we are meant to be—where God *desires* us to be. But God will not leave us alone. God claims us. As Paul says, “You were bought with a price.” We belong to God.

We are called to respond to this truth, again and again, every day of our lives. At least that's how I experience that quiet, deep pushing and pulling that is a kind of undertone in my life. I think that's God trying to get me to listen. Today we are invited to respond yet again, to affirm that we truly treasure the gift of being part of God's family. God assures us that the way has been prepared for us to share not only in the humanity of Christ, but in his divinity as well! And yes, we may even have to die to our old selves in order to be raised by God to our new lives, lives "illuminated" by the Word of God.

In the reading from the Gospel of John, Nathanael was at least deeply puzzled by his direct encounter with Jesus of Nazareth. Philip had responded to Jesus' call to "follow me." Philip then found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses speaks in the law, the One whom the prophets wrote about: Jesus, the son of Joseph from Nazareth." But Nathanael wonders whether anything good can come out of such a backwater as Nazareth. Philip invites him to "come and see."

But his encounter with Jesus is so transformative that Nathanael boldly proclaims: "Teacher, you are the Son of God." But Jesus says to him, "You will see greater things than these. . . . You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." This clearly is a reference to Jacob's "ladder," a vision the patriarch Jacob saw nearly two thousand years earlier. This is now claimed to be a present reality in Jesus of Nazareth.

Slowly, Philip and Nathanael are able to hear God’s voice speaking to them in this Jesus of Nazareth. They come to recognize that Jesus is the Light of the World, the One whom God sent to make a clear and final connection between this life and the divine life, the One who brought about a new relationship between God and the human family, the One who initiated a shift so profound we call it a “new creation.”

Like Samuel, like Paul, like Philip and Nathanael—when we are open to God in the very depths of our being, we will be illumined as they were illumined. Then we will share in the Epiphany, the “showing forth,” that “manifestation” of God to the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. But it is only God who is able to turn on the light, to connect us with the eternal dimension in our lives. We cannot do it on our own. All God expects of us is a wide open response to God’s daily, hourly, moment-by-moment invitations.

Our very lives as human beings are a gift from God. Our ability to appreciate and enjoy our families and communities, and our ability to rise above the pains and hurts of life with a spirit of compassion—surely, these are gifts from God. Our ability to use and develop our special talents for work or relationships—for simply loving one another—all these are gifts from the living God. Even our ability to say “yes” or “no” to God’s further offers of grace is itself a gift from God.

The life-giving Word of God *is* Jesus the Christ: alive and present not only in the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist that reveal and confirm our identity, but in our everyday lives as well. You see, God does not obliterate our humanity when Christ illumines our lives. Samuel, Paul, Philip and Nathanael are very human, indeed! But their openness to God made them shine with the radiance of Christ's glory, as open channels of the Word of God that is offered to each and every one of us.

God wants us to be fully who God intends us to be—vibrantly alive with the gifts we are given here and now, not only as individuals, but also in our relationship with one another as individuals, families, communities, societies and nations. And the illumination God desires for us is to take place not in the future, but in the midst of our lives, right here, right now. This illumination may be so bright, so intense, that it will burn away the accumulated clutter that so often fills our busy lives. God truly desires to light up our lives with the white hot radiance of God's presence, God's love, God's compassion.

This is the Lord's Epiphany. But this is also *our* epiphany: the continual rediscovery of how faith opens us to the sustaining presence of God, to the repeated call of the Word of God. And as we listen and continue to share in God's transforming presence, as we are "illumined" by the Word of God, we will be participants in the Epiphany. So let us boldly proclaim, by word and deed, with energy and expectation, that God's Son, our Savior Jesus Christ, *is* the light of the world—*in us!*