

January 12, 2020

Acts 10:34-43

Isaiah 42:1-9

This is the first Sunday in Epiphany. A church liturgical season that begins on January 6 and the story of the magi bringing gifts to Jesus. The Epiphany season, as the word implies, is a season of recognition, of understanding who Jesus is. Each year the first Sunday following January 6th always has as one of the given scripture readings the story of Jesus' baptism, which is an epiphany moment for John the Baptist. It is at the Jordan River John recognizes Jesus as the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah.

For many in the Jewish community, in Jesus' day and still today, the Messiah would be the one who would free the Jewish people and reestablish the reign of King David in Israel. I think it is safe to say that even among Jesus' followers there was a belief that Jesus would become a political, if not military, leader, who would free Israel from the Roman occupation. This did not seem to be how Jesus saw himself, nor was it how the followers of the resurrected Jesus had come to understand who he was and what that meant.

In today's reading Peter is very revealing in what Jesus meant to him and the growing church community: Jesus made clear to them that "God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from – if you want God and are ready to do as God says, the door is open." Another translation puts it this way "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God."

"God shows no partiality." This isn't just Peter's personal take-away. Paul wrote this to the church in Rome and Corinth and James' letter speaks to our need as followers of Jesus Christ to welcome all, regardless of position or wealth.

I don't want you to think this was something new to Jesus and his followers. The Hebrew Scriptures also speak of God's impartiality. In many passages we are not to judge people by their wealth or their poverty, rather by their integrity. But, this impartiality, over time, seems to have limited itself to only those within one's own tribe, which meant one could discriminate against or keep yourself separate from those who believed differently from yourself and, for the Hebrew people, this meant a separation between Jew and Gentile.

This wall of separation was torn down in the resurrection experience. Peter and the early church leaders came to understand that the message of love and forgiveness, revealed in Jesus, was meant for all peoples; a message which ultimately was found as untenable for the Jewish community, and is still untenable for some people who don't approve of people different from themselves.

In addition to his own, personal experience Peter backs up his statement with this line: "Our witness that he is the means to forgiveness of sins is backed up by the witness of all the prophets." One of those prophet witnesses is Isaiah. It has been widely accepted in the church, from its beginnings, that when Isaiah writes, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;" it is a foretelling of the Messiah, Jesus.

In this passage Isaiah writes about the Chosen One, who would be "a light to the nations", would "open the eyes that are blind", bringing "out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness." These are all things that the early church attributed to what Jesus had done. And, these words acted as a calling to the work the followers of Jesus were to do.

All of what I have said so far is the traditional Epiphany understanding of Jesus, who he was and what he means to us

today. But, as I read the words of Isaiah for this service, something new opened up for me. Isaiah wasn't foretelling Jesus' coming, per se. He was telling the people of Israel what one who serves God acts like. Isaiah is saying, if you choose God – as Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Joshua, and Samuel did, then you, too, will be a light to the nations, giving sight to the blind, freeing those oppressed and imprisoned.

These thoughts led me back to Jesus. It dawned on me, if we take our faith seriously, at its word, then Jesus, the Christ, the Resurrected One is still alive and with us today. In the language of the church Jesus is embodied, incarnate in the Body of Christ, the church – you and I.

You and I. The Body of Christ. If this is true, then Isaiah is not only writing about Jesus, who taught and healed and challenged the world around him 2,000 years ago. Isaiah is writing about us, about you and I.

Wow! Think about it! Isaiah is writing these words about you:

- 1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him and her; ...
3c they will faithfully bring forth justice.
4 They will not grow faint or be crushed
until they have established justice in the earth; ...
6b I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
7 to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

This, then, is our calling: to be God's servant. It can feel like a daunting task. I realized that fact as soon as the image of you and I being the Body of Christ came to my mind; you and I God's servant, the Chosen, the ones called bring forth

justice to the nations. But, while appearing daunting, don't deny or put it off. In the song Vaughn sang, "I Am a Servant", we are assured we are not alone in this calling. God will help us to start and will sustain us, as will the rest of the Body of Christ.

God calls us and when we are willing to follow, Isaiah has told us God's promise: "I will take you by the hand and keep you."

On this First Sunday after Epiphany here is the big reveal: In Jesus we see God much more clearly (even though, as Paul reminded us, we see only in a mirror dimly). God is, therefore, revealed. What Peter reminds us is that this revealed God does not play favorites. God loves all creation unconditionally, and interacts with all creation impartially.

What is new for me on this Sunday is that Jesus is still revealing God; that is, our understanding of God revealed is always changing. It continues to grow and deepen. All of this revealing happens when we live as the Body of Christ in the world; when we are willing to be a light of love and hope to the nations; a light that opens the eyes of those with blinders on, including our own; a light that opens doors and welcomes in those who have been locked out, including those we do not like; a light shining in the darkness of ignorance and hate.

You and I are the Body of Christ.

Together we are God's servant, whom God upholds.

We are the Chosen, in whom God delights.

We are one in Christ Jesus.

As we seek to live into the high calling of service and servanthood, may God's Spirit be upon us upholding us, strengthening us, encouraging us. Amen.