

January 21, 2024 Third Sunday of Epiphany

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Mark 1:14-20

Epiphany: An Invitation

Douglas T. King

Welcome to the third Sunday after Epiphany. It is not a season that gets much attention in our tradition, in fact it is not a season at all. After the magi show up to visit the baby Jesus in early January we pretty much put epiphany to bed. And in doing so we give short shrift to how epiphanies, epiphanic moments can and should shape our lives.

The word epiphany comes from the Greek word meaning manifestation or appearance. In other words an epiphany is when the divine is revealed to us in some fashion. I would propose a change to the liturgical calendar. Let us drop the lame designation of Sundays after Epiphany and have Sundays of Epiphany, a season when we celebrate and explore what it means to have the divine revealed to us.

I am giving this a test run this year. The sermon series which is beginning today, will look at three implications for epiphanies as being "An Invitation," being "Brought into Proximity with Power," and being "Gifted with Healing."

Today we begin with "An Invitation." "There are only two plots in all of literature; a stranger comes to town and a man goes on a journey." This famous quote, or some variation of it, has been ascribed to Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and even Hemingway. It was likely John Gardner. But provenance does not matter. What matters is that it does illumine something essential about the human condition. There are two basic ways our lives are

changed, that the plotlines of our personal narratives evolve significantly. Either something/someone new enters into our lives or we journey into a new context.

The gift of our text this morning is that it encompasses both of these plot lines. A stranger, Jesus, comes to town and then Simon and Andrew, James and John go on a journey. This stranger that comes into town brings big news and a big choice. These soon-to-be disciples are living under Roman rule but they are invited to become a part of a different kingdom, God's kingdom. Every epiphanic moment, every encounter with the divine is an invitation.

This text is always a bit jarring to me. These fishermen leave behind their entire lives to follow this stranger to God knows where. And they do it immediately. This text teaches us of the urgency of what is at stake. But it can be difficult to place ourselves in that moment of immediately leaving behind all that we know to follow.

I would argue it is more nuanced than that. Yes, that is what this specific text shows us. But the discipleship decision of Simon and Andrew, James and John is not encompassed in this single interaction. In the entirety of this gospel, Jesus' disciples will face this decision whether to follow, to live in God's kingdom, many, many times. And sometimes they will choose to not follow. When Peter rebukes Jesus, for saying he must suffer, Peter chooses not to live in God's kingdom. When Peter denies knowing Jesus three times before his execution, he chooses not to live in God's kingdom. And each time Peter then chose to again live in God's kingdom.

Choosing to follow Jesus and live in God's kingdom is no doubt an urgent choice. Every epiphanic moment, every encounter

with the divine offers an invitation, a choice. But perhaps it is not leaving behind all that we know in a single moment. It is a decision we are invited to make every day as we seek to take one step closer to God's kingdom. And inevitably we will find ourselves repeatedly crossing the border between two kingdoms.

I take comfort in the words of both Emily Dickinson and Fred Craddock. Dickinson speaks to the way in which we find ourselves living in both kingdoms, "We both believe, and disbelieve a hundred times an hour, which keeps believing nimble." And Fred Craddock tells of how the radical nature of Jesus calling us to discipleship, to picking up our cross and following him plays out in the reality of our lives. "We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table - 'Here's my life, Lord, I'm giving it all.' But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, 'Get lost.' Go to a committee meeting. Give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home. Usually giving our life to Christ is not glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time."

Every day, Jesus, in the Holy Spirit, calls to us and says the time has come. This is important. You need to make a choice. Every day presents the possibility of an epiphanic moment and a choice. We can turn toward God's kingdom or walk away from it. We can take a step towards a life of gratitude and compassion and live in the new kingdom. Or, we can continue to walk in the ways of entitlement and selfishness and live in the old kingdom. We can take a step toward creating a world

where every child of God is valued and precious, and live in the new kingdom. Or, we can continue to walk in the ways of a world where far too many are devalued and disrespected, and live in the old kingdom.

Every day we take a step toward one kingdom or the other. Every day God's presence is there for us to recognize. Every day we are given the gift of an invitation and a choice. And every day the choice is urgent and important. As Boris Pasternak, in *Doctor Zhivago* says, "I think we must be faithful to immortality, that other, slightly stronger name for life." (Wiman, p. 28)

In a previous church I served we had a 7:30 AM worship service on Wednesdays. I have to admit it was not always easy to work up worship energy on a dark and cold February morning. But on one of those Wednesdays as I finished preaching and sat down I had this powerful epiphanic experience. It felt as if I was dead and beyond all of the inconsequential details which often dominate my life. I was at perfect peace. I was liberated from myself and in that liberation had a clarity of vision that enabled me to see only what was most important. It was as if the divine gave me a sneak peak of a new geography; a preview of living beyond my neuroses; beyond my limitations of fear and selfish obsessions and minor concerns. It was an invitation. In those moments I found myself living in a new kingdom. I was finally free.

The reality of that epiphanic moment, and most of them, is that they are fleeting. I shortly returned to my neurotic self-obsessed old kingdom ways. But I can still pull up a

remnant of a taste of that experience. And every day I try to take a step in the direction of that geography, of that kingdom.

We have all had experiences in which we have felt touched by the divine in one way or another. And all of these experiences are an invitation to enter into a new kingdom, God's kingdom. Every time we experience the presence of the divine we receive a revelation, an invitation.

Wisdom from the poet Christian Wiman, "The revelation we want---or at any rate the revelation we need--is not ultimate, but intimate...Those intuitions and epiphanies are real, and our reactions to them can be, in the moment, so total and unselfconscious... But they fade, those moments, and we relapse in the vertiginous Ifs we are. What one wants...is some assurance that between the endless errands that crush the soul and the sudden warbler that ignites it, between the bills and births and meals and funerals, all the graces and losses of any life attended to no matter how erratically or imperfectly--under it all there *must* exist some intact tissue of meaning..." (Wiman, pp. 226-227)

Every day the divine is personally seeking to reveal Godself to us and reveal the "intact tissue of meaning" to be found in our lives. In this season of epiphany let us honor those moments by accepting the invitation into God's kingdom.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Wiman, Christian, *Zero at the Bone: Fifty Entries Against Despair*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, 2023.