

Ordinary Time

Becoming the People of God

Epiphany of the Lord - January 6, 2024

[Isaiah 60:1-6](#) [Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14](#) [Ephesians 3:1-12](#) [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

First Sunday after the Epiphany - Baptism of the Lord – And There Was Morning

January 7, 2024

[Genesis 1:1-5](#) [Mark 1:4-11](#)

Color – Green

PLANNING NOTES

Take a deep breath. You made it. We're officially on the other side of Advent, Christmas, and New Year's Day. After all the preparation, the complex emotions, and the celebrations in December, the allure of the return of Ordinary Time in January is probably all too real. But don't put those white paraments or festive altarscapes away quite yet! Today is a day of celebration—possibly two celebrations—if that's what you choose—although a different kind of celebration than Christmas. Rather than the celebration of Christ's arrival, think of today as a celebration of our send-off as we join Jesus on a path that takes us into Ordinary Time and ultimately the beginning of Lent. As the first Sunday after the Epiphany (observed on January 6), today we celebrate Baptism of Our Lord Sunday. However, since January 6 is the day before, you may also choose to observe [Epiphany](#) on this day in addition to the [Baptism of Our Lord](#).

If you do choose to celebrate Epiphany and Jesus' baptism, embrace the opportunity to marry the revelation and wonder of Epiphany with the affirmation of Jesus' nature as fully human and fully divine at his baptism. Join the magi and the crowds as they encounter Love made flesh, dwelling on the earth in a simple home as a child and being cleansed in the water of a flowing river. Too often we get caught up in the extraordinary gifts brought from the East or the dove and the booming voice in the sky, and we miss the holiness of the ordinary elements within these extraordinary events. So, help your people notice. Tell them the story of Jesus playing on the dusty floor when wise men appear in the doorway. Surround the worship space with reminders of flowing water, literal and physical. I did say not to get rid of the white just yet, but mix it in with blues and greens, the colors of earth and water. And maybe even a little gold, something to catch the light as it plays with the shadows, reminding the congregation that in the beginning, God set apart light and dark and called it all good. What a necessary reminder as we continue on the journey of becoming the people of God in this new year!

Today is also a day to revel in ritual. For many, this will be a day to celebrate Holy Communion, but don't let that keep you from also celebrating the reaffirmation of baptism. (You can find the Baptismal Covenant IV liturgy in the *Book of Worship* and [here](#).) Invite the congregation to once again renounce sin and profess their faith. Invite them to hear the story of God's presence among the waters from Genesis 1, Jesus being nurtured in the womb, and the Great Commission Jesus gave the disciples at his ascension. Encourage congregants to touch and feel the water and remember the grace that saves and

forms us as disciples of Jesus Christ. Embrace Baptism of Our Lord Sunday as a time to reassert our identity as baptized people who are saved by grace, incorporated into Christ's Body, the Church, and called to a life of discipleship. And then, ask the congregation to come to the Table and join in the Holy Meal, having reaffirmed that all who are gathered are members of God's family. In so many ways, the rituals on this Sunday both proclaim the Word and respond to the Word, inviting all who gather for worship to embody the message of the day with their words and actions.

PREACHING NOTES

Are you combing Epiphany and Baptism of the Lord again? We seem to run into that problem often. There isn't enough time to get all these events in—especially since we worship only on Sundays, or most of us anyway. Yesterday was Epiphany; today is Baptism of the Lord. Or maybe you slipped Epiphany into last week's worship. It isn't difficult to place them together, however. You might lose the Magi if you skip ahead to the baptism, but the theme is certainly there. Revealing the presence of God in our midst and Jesus joining the ranks of those who stand in need of redemption – even though he didn't. That Jesus plunged into the waters, like a polar bear swimmer, was a sign of God with us.

They were there again. Those polar bear guys and gals. They were there. In every town and city, it seems. They run down on New Year's Day to leap into the city's river, lake, or pond. Brr. Of course, the pictures of those having to dodge ice flows were more dramatic, but still... I imagine that every body of water on January 1 is cold enough for their purposes. Whatever they are.

That's what fascinates me, I guess. Those purposes. I'm sure they have them. Even if they are of the mountain climbing variety – "Because it's there!" Some argue the health benefits of a bracing dip in the water. In Finland, apparently, they heat up in the sauna and then run and roll in the snow or plunge in icy waters, and it is supposed to be good for something. Heart? Circulation? Mental stability? No, that doesn't seem right. Maybe some medical personnel can weigh in on that one.

But why New Year's Day? What is the significance there? Maybe it is getting it over with. Maybe if you start the day by jumping in a frozen lake or river, you figure your year has got to be uphill from there. You survive that, you can survive anything.

That makes some sense, in a weird sort of way. Maybe it is a new start. Maybe they figure the heart stops with the shock of the cold water, and so it is kind of like being reborn. I've got to admit, there is theological precedent for that mindset. Okay, it isn't the coldness, necessarily, but water is a symbol of rebirth for us Christians. A symbol of birth. The Great Thanksgiving prayer used for Advent talks about how God sent Jesus "nurtured in the waters of the womb," a reminder of the humanity of Christ.

Water figures in both the Gospel and the Hebrew scriptures passages for this Sunday. It is the second Sunday of Epiphany and, therefore, the baptism of the Lord. But the Old Testament passage also mentions water.

When time began, God was. When Creation came to be, God was the cause. The water here is the incubator, the womb of God out of which Creation is birthed. "The wind of God swept over the face of the waters," says the NRSV; "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters," says the NIV. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* says, "God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss." I like that.

Brooded. Like a hen tending the eggs before they hatch, like a mother waiting for the time to give birth. God tends the creation; God calls it forth.

But wait, it is the Spirit that is the creative force of God, or the Word? The Spirit brooded; the Word was spoken, and there was. The prologue to the Gospel of John tells us the Word was that force: John 1:3 (NRSV) says, “*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.*” It was the Word that brought forth light, and then it was the Word that pronounced it good.

We sometimes forget that part of the story. We wrestle over creation; we argue about theories, but we sometimes forget the goodness that is a part of all that God has created. Or maybe we forget what “good” means. God saw that it was good. But the light was not yet complete. The sun hadn’t been made yet, in the story. The moon and the “lesser lights” of the stars were still on the drawing board. But it was good. Goodness must mean something other than finished. It must mean something other than perfect as we define that term. Perhaps it means born of God. Or maybe it means that we have found what we’re looking for.

When I was on Sabbatical several years ago, I happened to be in Dallas Texas, looking at churches to learn from, and I happened to drive past an Episcopal church with the banner advertising an upcoming service called the “U2-charist.” Well, I was intrigued, and I changed my Sunday morning plans so that I could join this church for worship.

I have since discovered that this service wasn’t unique to that Dallas congregation. There are several churches that have set a service of Communion to the music of U2. Similarly, other churches have used a Bible study series based on the old Mayberry television show. The church often looks to popular culture as a way of connecting faith and life. Much of it seems shallow and desperate, but sometimes it helps us hear the gospel in new ways.

The Irish band U2 has always been upfront about their Christian faith, though many - inside and outside the church - deride them for it. But I have always found their subtle presentation of faith to be captivating. Perhaps, and this seems to be what upsets many inside the faith, it is their uncertainty that is so intriguing. U2 songs seem to be more about questions than about answers. The song “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” epitomizes that best for me. The final verse and chorus read like this:

*I believe in the Kingdom Come / Then all the colours will bleed into one / But yes I'm still running
/ You broke the bonds / You loosed the chains / You carried the cross / And my shame / And my
shame / You know I believe it / But I still haven't found / What I'm looking for.*

I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For lyrics © Polygram Int. Music Publishing B.v.

The song has a sort of an “I believe, help my unbelief” kind of theme—where many of us live our lives, somewhere between doubt and certainty. This just might be the oddest way possible to begin a reflection on the Baptism of the Lord.

If you keep up on all things liturgical, then you know that the Sunday after Epiphany is the Baptism of the Lord. So, we go from Christmas and all that celebration to Epiphany (which is on the twelfth day of Christmas - hence the song) and the wise men finding their way to the child; then we leap forward some thirty years to the baptism of Jesus. The main characters of the story are Jesus (duh) and John the

Baptist. And I doubt that you could find a couple of guys more certain about faith and their roles in the world than those two. They seemed to radiate faith and confidence. That was part of John's appeal, I believe. Folks flocked to this wild man from the desert with his questionable sartorial choices and fad diet from an entomologist's nightmare. There was more than the curiosity factor at work here. There was a longing for certainty. Mark's version pares down the conversation and the sermon, but the other gospels reflect a man who railed against doubters and the powers of this world that would confuse us. He hands out advice like a man writing a "Dear Abby" column. He knows what's what and who is who. Mark, on the other hand, just gets to the point; he knows his place, the role he is called to play in this drama of salvation, and he plays it with passion.

So, where does all of my musing about uncertainty come from? I can't read about John without remembering Jesus' comments later on, in Matthew and Luke. Jesus says to the people concerning their fascination with John, "What did you go out to see?" (Matt 11:7-15 & Lk 7:25-30) In both accounts, these remarks are occasioned by the questions that came from John when he had been imprisoned and faced certain death. Suddenly, even John's certainty seemed elusive.

What did they go out to see? Someone who knew. Someone who had found what he (and they) was looking for. So, John gave it to them with water and with words. They glimpsed it in the gathering of the multitudes. (I love the preacher's estimate of the size of the crowd in our text: "the whole countryside ... all the people of the city.") That was why they splashed into the river to be baptized by this crazy man. He had something they wanted. He saw what they were looking for.

And he pointed it out. It's not me, he declared over and over, though they thought it was him. That's why they kept coming and kneeling and letting the water of his certainty wash over them. But it wasn't him; it was another; it was that guy. That guy was Jesus, who came to be baptized by John. Not, I believe, because Jesus needed the repentance and the certainty that was on offer but because he wanted to be present. He wanted to align himself with a move back toward God, a movement toward certainty. And because he wanted to be a memory that would come back to them when the doubts came creeping back in.

Glimpses, that's what we get. We want certainty; we want to be sure. But we get hints. We get whispers. And yet Epiphany and the baptism of Jesus remind us that those hints are all around us. Just open your eyes and see and be reminded. See the presence in the drops of water that bead up on our glass on a humid day. Baptism tells us that if this water is a carrier of the Holy Spirit, then any water can be. The water you showered with this morning, the water you drank when you were thirsty after a long hard day, the water you gaze out upon in your favorite rest and renewal place; these all vibrate with the Spirit. It is all a reminder that you were claimed, that you are a beloved child with whom God is well pleased.

Of course, we need reminders of our baptism. It is too much of an event to keep in our hearts all the time. We forget what a transformative moment baptism is. We forget that everything old is torn away, like the heavens were rent apart, as Mark says. We forget that our orientation is from that moment; our new life is claimed in that moment. We forget that what we are looking for, longing for, is already ours in that moment. We lose our grip; we forget it even happened. We are still running; we are still looking for what we already have.

Remember your baptism. It isn't just an empty ritual for Sunday mornings. It is a way of living that keeps our eyes open for the descending doves of the Spirit. It is a choice that we can claim to embrace the possibilities in front of us instead of the doubts within us. It is an opportunity to know that we are loved and claimed and that whatever darkness is hiding away in our past or our hearts need not define us anymore. It is a family we've entered, who will run with us as we search for what we are looking for, and who will avoid saying "told you so" when we realize what we are looking for has been with us all the time.

Second Sunday after the Epiphany – Your Servant is Listening

January 14, 2024, Human Relations Day

[1 Samuel 3:1-10, \(11-20\) John 1:43-51](#)

Color – Green

PLANNING NOTES

As we enter fully into Ordinary Time this week, the calendar reminds us that there is nothing ordinary about becoming the people of God. On the Sunday before Martin Luther King Jr. Day, today we observe Human Relations Day, an opportunity for congregations to join together across the connection to raise awareness and funds for social justice initiatives and outreach to at-risk youth. Human Relations Day offers opportunities to listen to God's call to create beloved community together. Consider how taking up a special offering can serve as the first step in your congregation's ongoing work to share the assets of the whole community—gifts, time, skills, money, expertise, connections—to create a neighborhood, a city, a nation, and a world where all can flourish.

It is appropriate that Human Relations Day falls on a Sunday when our theme is *listening*. Listening and action feed each other as grace forms us into the people of God. Look for ways to create space for listening today that integrate with the call to act justly and kindly. Set the stage for the congregation to enter into a quiet space to pay attention to what God is doing and saying in them and the community. Consider what practices might be necessary to help those gathered to enter into this listening space. Perhaps to listen for God's voice, the congregation must first clear out the noise in their hearts and minds through a prayer of confession or intercession. Or, perhaps we need to sing the opening verse of "Lord, Speak to Me" (*United Methodist Hymnal* 463) or the chorus of "Word of God, Speak" (*Worship & Song* 3184) to focus our hearts and minds as we attend to God's voice. Whatever you choose, consider the best way to help your people enter into the interplay of listening and action.

The move into Ordinary Time also means a transition to green as our primary liturgical color as we enter this short season between Epiphany and Lent. This is certainly a time to highlight the mundane in your visuals in the worship space, particularly through earthy greens and natural materials. Also consider how some of the blues from the previous week might make their way into this week, as well. How might you visually reference Christ's baptism as we journey through the next four weeks, reminding the congregation visually that we *are* and we are *becoming* the people of God through our union with the Incarnate Christ whose identity is made known in his baptism?

PREACHING NOTES

Human Relations Day is a reminder that we are one human community. It is a "kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven" day. It is an opportunity for us to put our money where our mouth is. The offerings we collect on this day are used to support community development efforts, voluntary services programs, and youth offender rehabilitation programs. (See more here: <https://www.umc.org/en/content/human-relations-day-faq>.) It's an opportunity for us to remember that we are called to be listening to the voices around us—just as Samuel had to learn.

Poor Samuel. He was caught up in something that was bigger than he was. It was something that was shaping the life of the whole people of God. But he didn't know it. He was just a kid, doing what he was

told. He didn't have any sense of the big picture. He didn't know what was behind the scenes, what was underneath the daily duties he performed without question, or what was above the ceiling that caught wisps of smoke from the lantern in the holy place. All he knew was duty, and he did it—mostly because there wasn't anyone else to do it. Eli, his mentor, was going blind and could no longer perform the duties of his office. And Eli's sons, who should have been stepping up to fulfill those duties, had already made such a mess of their power and authority that faith in the institution of the priesthood was at a very low ebb. But Samuel just did his job. No matter what was swirling around him, he performed his duties. And this was the result.

"The word of the Lord was rare in those days." That seems to be an odd sort of beginning for a story that takes place in the temple of the Lord. And yet, there it is. So, Samuel's days were filled with the thousand little details that Eli could no longer perform to keep the rituals ready for the people of God, who were like sheep without a shepherd because "the word of the Lord was rare in those days."

That makes you wonder what people turned to when they didn't have access to the voice of God, doesn't it? What sorts of authority did people call on? What sorts of diversions did they obsess over? What sorts of voices did they listen to? To fill the empty nights and cover up the loneliness of living, what sounds did they ache for?

Living a directionless life is draining as well as pointless. It messes with your sense of self-worth as well as emptying you of ambition and hope. So, what are we left with these days, when "the word of the Lord is rare"? Are we just supposed to generate our own direction? Are we left to our own devices? It is, indeed, all about us, after all.

Or do we listen deeper? Is there something to hear after all? We've convinced ourselves that what we see is what we get, or this is all there is, or ... whatever. But even though the word of the Lord is rare, even though those who are supposed to speak for the Lord are going blind, the "lamp of God has not yet gone out." We may have given up on God, but God has not given up on us.

The Voice still calls. It may be night in our souls, the darkness of doubt and fear and emptiness, but the Voice still calls. That is what our faith tells us when our ears are weary of listening to the silence. But then, there isn't any silence anymore, is there? That may be why we don't hear, not because it is too quiet, but because it is too loud. It's loud in our world with distractions aplenty, voices calling, blaming, warning, vying for our attention. It's loud in our souls, where we are filled with our own questions and fears, filled with our own failures and inadequacies. It is so loud we don't hear the Voice anymore, the Voice that leads and comforts, the Voice that challenges and guides. We don't hear it anymore because we've stopped listening. Or if we do hear it, it sounds just like all the other voices around us. No wonder Samuel thought he was hearing Eli. No wonder we think it is a spouse or a friend, or a book we read, or a song we heard. No wonder we thought it was indigestion or an impulse to do something really crazy. Because we've forgotten how to listen for the Voice.

When Eli finally (finally!) figures out what is going on, he begins to teach; he begins to mentor. Instead of using Samuel as someone to do the grunt work, to clean now and ask questions later, he finally begins to introduce him to the source of the Voice. He names that source, "Lord." Say "Speak Lord," says Eli, "That's what you say. That's the beginning of putting yourself within hearing distance of the Voice." And then, having identified the source, put yourself in the position— "your servant," the one who follows, the one who obeys, the one who does. "Your servant is listening," that's what you say, explains Eli. You

say, “I know who you are, I know who I am, and I want to hear what you have to say. I want to be led; I want to be taught. I want to be claimed.”

It isn’t easy, Samuel gets it wrong at first. “Speak, your servant is listening.” He missed the address, missed the identification. But that’s ok; that will come. Because it comes from a servant’s heart. Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.

Nathaniel wasn’t listening; that’s obvious. His ears were full of the common wisdom of his day. He knew who was in and who was out. He could recognize a scam, something too good to be true. He’d been burned before, perhaps. He just knew that nothing good came from the sticks. Or the north. Or that side of the tracks. He knew where he could hear something worth listening to and where he was wasting his time. So, when Philip invites him and gushes over this hick from the country, Nathaniel rolls his eyes and snorts.

But he goes. Now there’s a thing, don’t you think? He was sure there wasn’t anything in it. He was as cynical as the average guy on the street, but he went. Was it because of his friend who asked him? Maybe. Probably. Or maybe it was because behind the cynical shell, there was still an ear willing to listen to a voice that would speak into his emptiness. Maybe there was enough hope, not quite buried, that caused him to shuffle along behind Philip, grumbling all the way but secretly wanting it to be true. How else do you explain the amazing turnaround? Jesus says something odd – “Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit.” And Nathaniel asks, “How do you know me?” Does Jesus avoid the question? “I saw you under the fig tree” hardly seems like an answer to the “how” question. Something is going on here. Something that we might not see, something that might be beyond the written words. It sounds like an innocuous response, but it leads to a confession of faith. How does that happen? Who knows? Somehow Nathaniel heard something that he was listening for. He didn’t seem to come with a “Speak Lord, your servant is listening,” and yet that exchange turned his life around.

Maybe the lesson here is that we shouldn’t make assumptions. When we look around at our community, we think these folks want nothing to do with us. They don’t care about our message. They won’t want to belong, to connect. So, we don’t bother because we know how it will go. But perhaps Samuel and Nathaniel have a different message. Keep speaking, keep inviting, keep telling your story. Who knows who is really listening?

Third Sunday after the Epiphany – A Second Time

January 21, 2024

[Jonah 3:1-5, 10](#) [Mark 1:14-20](#)

Color – Green

PLANNING NOTES

This is a week of call-and-response. Jesus calls the disciples, and they follow. God calls Jonah—*again*—and Jonah finally concedes. In both [texts](#), there is persistence to the call, but in that, there is also persistence in the need to respond. We cannot become the people of God without responding to God's call on our lives. In the study of music history and theory, the formal term for call-and-response is *antiphon*. The first time I encountered this term, I (incorrectly) assumed that this term meant something like sound (*phon*) in opposition (*anti*). But this rudimentary definition did not quite capture what I heard when I listened to examples of antiphonal music, like Andrea Gabrieli's 16-part *Gloria* (listen [here](#)). Composing for St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, Italy, Gabrieli took advantage of the vast space to divide the ensemble into four four-part choirs, placing each choir in a different area of the worship space along with instruments. The result is different choirs and soloists singing to one another across the space, sometimes alternating, sometimes overlapping to create a natural surround sound for those gathered to hear the majestic praise of the angels who appeared to the shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to people of good will." This is the furthest thing from "sound in opposition." As I studied this music, I learned that "anti-" can also mean "in return." Suddenly, *antiphon* made so much more sense! This "sound in return" music depends on the back-and-forth response of every musician to offer beautiful praise to God and declare the good news through song. Rather than the voices and instruments being in opposition to or in competition with one another, they *depend on* one another to receive and respond, or the music doesn't work.

Ok, so why go down this rabbit trail into sixteenth-century sacred music? Because we have an opportunity today to dig deep into the experience of God's call and our response in worship. Too often, we imagine that God's call is like a command instead of an invitation, meaning our response is more about obedience than bringing our full selves to respond by participating with God's good news. But, if we think of our journey of becoming the people of God antiphonally, we recognize that both God's call and our response are needed to build the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven. So, how do we help our people embody their role in this responsive, antiphonal relationship with God in worship?

First, extend the efforts made last week to create space for listening into this week. Allow space within the worship service for people to listen to and discern God's call. And then, create opportunities for response. Perhaps you invite congregants to write down what they hear God saying and how they will participate with God in response, followed by a time of gathering and blessing the calls and responses as a community. Or maybe you include a time of testimony where a person or group in the church shares their journey to discern and respond to God's call. Remember, "success" here is defined by earnest and faithful participation with God. What may seem small by worldly standards may be just the thing that inspires your community to keep listening and responding to God's persistent call on our lives.

Second, take the opportunity to make the texts come alive. Help your people enter into these stories by humanizing the characters. Gather a couple of congregants and act out one of the texts. Use some holy imagination to flesh out the interaction between Jesus and the disciples or God and Jonah. Recruit a congregant to help you imagine what one of these stories might look like if it was set in your community

now. Do what makes sense in your community to help those gathered recognize Jonah, Simon, Andrew, James, and John as people just like us who were presented with a call and made a choice to accept God's invitation.

Finally, root every aspect of the liturgy around the persistence of God's grace that calls us to become the people of God. Pull out one of your congregation's heart songs that speaks to God's never-ending love. Include an invitation to discipleship that emphasizes that God never stops calling and never stops giving us opportunities to answer. Bookend the service with a call to worship and a benediction that welcomes and sends out the congregation with the blessing of God's enduring grace in our lives. Today is a day to celebrate that, by grace, it is never too late to join in God's song of good news and abundant life.

PREACHING NOTES

Is it, "They immediately left their nets and followed him" or is it, "The word of the Lord came a second time"? I know, you're saying that they are both in there. But I mean, which is it for you? Or for your congregation? How often do you get an immediate response? It does happen. Someone who is ready, someone who is leaning in already, someone who is itching to get going. Maybe Peter and Andrew were already thinking about leaving this fishing thing behind. Maybe James and John were just looking for an excuse to get off their boat, leave their dad behind, and set off on an adventure. It could be a case of narrative foreshortening, meaning that there were details left out of the story so as not to interfere with the flow. But that's just speculation. Maybe the better clue is in Jesus' announcement – or what some call his first sermon, at least according to Mark.

"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of heaven has come near." That's the announcement. And it is followed by an invitation, "repent and believe the good news." There are so many layers to this statement, and we often go for the easiest, or simplest, or the one that asks for the least amount of effort on our parts. But what if we went deeper? What if we asked why Peter and Andrew and then James and John jumped to respond to Jesus so easily and so quickly? Maybe they did so because it was the right time.

"The time is fulfilled, says Jesus," and Mark uses the word "*kairos*" to talk about that time. *Kairos*, as you know, is different from *chronos*. The latter is time on the clock. The former is the right time, the appropriate time. Or as many of us say so easily, God's time. But what does that mean: God's time? Of the many things that it could mean, it might include an idea of preparation, of watching and waiting, of conversation and questioning that plants some seeds and gives them some time to grow. Maybe Jesus did that in the unspoken background of the text. Or maybe Jesus listened to the questions that they were asking one another or to the complaints that they made at the end of a long day. Maybe Jesus was paying attention to the condition of the spirit of those he was wanting to call. That's what made it the right time. And the kingdom is near because they were somehow open to God, ready for the Spirit to come and set their feet on a new path, to respond to the hope in their hearts. Maybe they responded because Jesus listened to them first, got to know them, saw them and heard them, and then invited them.

And what did he ask them to do? "Repent and believe the good news." What had they done wrong? That's the problem with the word "repent." We associate it with doing something wrong, with sinful

acts. It might mean that, but in this case, it is more like Jesus was calling them to reorient their lives. You've been working for one thing; now it is time to strive for something else. You've been going in one direction, now you need to make a turn toward a new destination, a new set of priorities. Jesus was asking them to change. That is a considerably larger transformation than stopping some habit or behavior. And he tells them what they are to change toward: "Believe the good news."

Here we have taken this word, this call to a new way of living, and turned it into an intellectual assent to certain propositions or ideas. There are, to be sure, intellectual components to this call to believe. But it never was intended to be a head thing only. It is a way of living. It is claiming a new possibility with every fiber of your being. It is putting all your eggs in this one basket. It is betting your life on the truth of the gospel. All of that and more. It is the lens through which you look at everything in the world, including yourself. We dabble with belief for the most part. We skirt around the edges, nod our heads, and recite the proper creeds. But this placing all our hopes and dreams in Jesus seems distant for many of us. At our best, we are on the way.

Did Peter and Andrew and James and John get all this at first? Not in the least. But they had an inkling, I believe. There was something passionate about this invitation and the person who issued it to them. There was something attractive in an indescribable way. So, maybe they did seize the moment and follow immediately. We can always hope that is the case when we invite and encourage and reach out to our community, that they too will jump at the chance and follow the one we follow too.

But what if they don't? What if, instead of leaving their old lives behind, they turn and dive even deeper into what they were doing, how they understood life and love, and run from us? Then what do we do? Reread Jonah. The word of the Lord came a second time.

Let's compare the two calls in Jonah. Chapter 1, verse 2, "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me." Now, chapter 3, verse 2: "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." Kinda the same and kinda not, don't you think? Well, there is the "get up" in the second call. But that's because Jonah is lying on a beach covered in the regurgitated meal of a great fish that served as an Uber. So, yeah, get up Jonah. Maybe take a shower? That's implied, I think.

Nineveh is still a great city, and Jonah is still called to proclaim. But the tone has changed. There's no talk of their wickedness in the second call. Just the command to tell them what God wanted them to hear. But it seems like the tone has changed. This makes us think that maybe the hard line in chapter one was more for Jonah's benefit than for Nineveh's. God knew that Jonah didn't want the job, didn't much like Nineveh, and was likely to hit the bricks—tr the waves, in this case. But now that Jonah has been chastened somewhat, God just says, "Go tell them what I want you to tell them." And Jonah drags his feet partway into the city.

One of our constant questions when addressing a biblical text is, "Who are we in this story?" If we're honest with ourselves, we can't help but identify with Jonah. Maybe this is our story too. And it is good to be honest enough with ourselves to admit that. But the real call of the book of Jonah is to be more like the God who sent him; the one who believes in second chances; the one who doesn't give up issuing the invitation, even when the response isn't what was hoped. We ask again and again; we invite again and again. We make ready, roll out the carpet, and focus on hospitality again and again. That's what it

means that God didn't give up on Jonah. We don't give up on one another and on the community around us. We are in the business of making disciples who make disciples.

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany – Among Your Own People

January 28, 2024

[Deuteronomy 18:15-20](#) [Mark 1:21-28](#)

Color – Green

PLANNING NOTES

Let's take a moment to look back on our journey through this series. We returned to the baptismal waters where we encountered Jesus, who entered the waters to show us the way to God's abundant life. We listened for the voice of God alongside Samuel, Philip, and Nathanael. With Jonah, Simon, Andrew, James, and John, we received the persistent and grace-filled invitation to participate with God in living out the fullness of God's kingdom here and now. So, what's next? Where does the path take us now?

Discernment. If you were expecting something a little more exciting, I'm sorry to disappoint you. But, if I'm honest, I'm not too disappointed because, even though discernment isn't particularly thrilling, it is essential for all of us who seek to become the people of God. Discernment is part of the antiphonal relationship we have with God (see last week's planning notes to find out more about what I mean by *antiphonal*). When we discern the movement of God in our individual and communal lives, we are continuing the call-and-response between us and God, depending on God's grace and guidance to show us where to go, what to do, and who to be.

As the title of today's sermon indicates, discernment occurs from among the people. That is why we must nurture and support the work of discernment within communal worship. Consider how you might highlight the ways that your congregation encourages the calling and giftedness of one another. Highlight ministerial candidates or seminary students from your congregation by having them take on leadership roles during the service or sharing the testimony of their experience of discerning their call within the community. Make a special effort to feature the work of your altar guild, quilting circle, or knitting group by visually displaying some of their work and sharing stories of how their efforts have made a difference in the church and the community. Give the children and youth an opportunity to tell a story, pray, or create art for the worship space. Offer up a litany of thanks for all the ways that the church shows up for one another and for the community.

But wait, aren't we focused on discernment? Yes! And one of the ways we practice discernment is by noticing the places God is at work among us. When we do this, we come to expect that God does raise up from among us those with the gifts, skills, and assets our community needs to become a place where God's love reigns. That said, we also must continue to create space to listen and to *dream* with God about what God might want us to do next. So, make space for dreaming in worship. Invite God to be in the community's imagining of how to work with God to live the good news in your neighborhood. And then, listen to what comes bubbling up. Create space outside of worship that encourages people to share how God sparked their holy imagination. Remember that not every idea has to be acted on—that's part of discernment! But every idea can be helpful in noticing how the Spirit is moving and discovering ways the church can join in.

If you are interested in further resources to assist your congregation in the work of communal discernment, you can access "The ReCycle: A Process for Community Discernment" from Discipleship Ministries [here](#).

PREACHING NOTES

One of the many tasks and opportunities before the community who are becoming the people of God is discernment. As the community meets together for worship and fellowship and for learning, they are also listening for the call of God who will be working within certain individuals to cultivate gifts and inclinations that will lead them into certain roles within the life of the church. As Paul wrote, “Some are gifted to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers” (*Ephesians 4:11*). These are roles that the church needs. More than that, they are roles that God has determined are necessary for the church to fulfill its mission.

When our text from Deuteronomy reveals that God promises to raise up a prophet from “among your own people,” how do we envision that will happen? Does a light go off over someone’s head? Is there a special delivery from the angel Amazoniel with robes of office, complete with staff that turns into a snake? How are these prophets or any leaders identified within the body? We know from Jesus’ own experience that taking a leadership role while among the people who know you best is a difficult proposition at best. Cries of “Who does he think he is” would ring out or be whispered in small groups of the disgruntled. Glaring looks might be given to the one who dares to rise to the top. Snorts of derision and “anyone but her” might be mumbled here and there.

At least that is what we fear would happen if we dared to respond to the call that is rising within us. Or perhaps we should say that this is the stereotype of what happens. But the truth is often something quite different. The community of faith can be a supportive incubator for those who discern a call to leadership or ministry of various kinds. Even more, the community can be the means through which some individuals can begin to understand that God is at work within them. When we hear affirmation for speaking out or taking leadership, when we are given encouragement for our attitudes or empathy, when voices tell us that we are good at that or we see your heart in this, we feel a call from God being confirmed in the life of the congregation. God says, “I will raise up a prophet like Moses from among the people;” this is how it happens in the life of the church. We value the work of outside experts or consultants. They often provide a valuable service and a sometimes-overlooked perspective. But when one of our own stands up to lead or proclaim or to follow a call to ministry, we feel pride and connection – as if all of us have been called to cultivate and train this new leader. I remember in the beginning of my pastoral ministry, some of those small churches leaned into the role of helping to prepare me for ministry. I became one of the members of the community who was being shaped and loved into service for the Lord’s work. It is the work of the people of God to cultivate God’s call from within.

Of course, it isn’t easy. There are struggles in both discerning and following that call. The Deuteronomy text warns of the latter. You’ve got to get it right. The message you proclaim needs to be the one that gives life and not death. It needs to represent the God we’ve come to know in Jesus, or there will be hell to pay. Those in leadership positions can cause damage with this power and place in the life of the community. Sometimes a leader might speak of another god – like a god of power or wealth, the god of ego or lust – to advance that leader’s own ends. We see it happen all too frequently. And death and destruction are often the result—sometimes after considerable damage is done to the people of God.

The Gospel text continues this adversarial approach: “What have you to do with us, Jesus?” That demonic question is often behind the reluctance of a community to follow the authority of the Christ who calls us to make disciples. The encounter with the man with the unclean spirit is certainly the most dramatic part of the text. But notice that it begins with amazement about the authority of the teaching

of Jesus. “It’s not like the scribes,” the people note. It’s not simply repeating the tradition of the people of God and various teachers throughout history. But there is something new, something immediate. It is a now moment, a responsive moment that Jesus presents. And then he shows them what he means by healing the man who challenges him, the man with an unclean spirit.

We ascribe the title “demonic” to an incomprehensible evil. Sometimes it is used to avoid responsibility; that is why many of us are reluctant to use a word like “demonic” when speaking of human actions. But it also reminds us that there are “powers and principalities” that are beyond our understanding. It reminds us that there is evil in the world greater than the totality of evil that resides in human hearts.

Our response to such a realization is either to live in fear and suspicion of everyone and everything or to stand against such evil with the power of our Savior wrapped up in the community of faith. One of the questions in the baptism ritual asks parents and sponsors, as well as the candidates for baptism when they are able to answer for themselves, “Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?” It is a part of the nature of our faith that we stand against the demonic both in our society and in ourselves.

Sometimes our call is to silence those demonic voices. And the best way to do that is to present a better narrative. We are to tell a better story about how the world can work in God’s kingdom, how the church can represent a better way of being the kin-dom of God. Sometimes shouting and pointing fingers just raises everyone’s blood pressure. It might be better to bring healing to a broken world with kindness and gentleness. It’s not avoiding confrontation with evil but refusing to play the same games. We do so by standing in the authority of Jesus.

Like the prophet who comes from within the people of God, sometimes the demonic does as well. We ought to be as quick to call out what is wrong within us and among us as we are to point out how bad things are “out there.” It has been said that the best advantage we have in our task of evangelism is the church, and, at the same time, the biggest handicap we have thwarting our evangelism is the church. We are the kingdom’s greatest asset and worst enemy —at the same time. We are constantly called to But we are also looking outward, caring for our wider community, inviting and including and making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany – With Wings Like Eagles

February 4, 2024

[Isaiah 40:21-31](#) [Mark 1:29-39](#)

Color – Green

PLANNING NOTES

Though this is the final week of this worship series, our journey to become the people of God continues as sanctifying grace works in our lives to form us more and more into the image of Christ. And so, we end this series by focusing on a feature of our life with God that is critical to sustaining us along the way: *paying attention*. Now, this is not just about us paying attention to God. It is also about cultivating the trust that God pays attention to us.

The passages [from Isaiah and Mark](#) give us a lot of opportunities to explore different aspects of paying attention. Perhaps you want to highlight how to pay attention to the internal life with God. Consider starting the service by inviting people to welcome themselves to worship with all the highs and lows, struggles and triumphs that they carry with them into the space. Begin the passing of the peace guiding congregants to greet themselves with peace before they greet one another with peace. Incorporate a prayer of confession that names the ways we struggle to pay attention, including the ways we ignore our own emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical needs.

Or maybe you want to focus on paying attention to the needs of others. I am almost positive that Simon Peter's mother-in-law didn't just get up from her sick bed and start serving Jesus and the disciples just to keep busy. She noticed a need and met it. What are the ways gathered worship can help us practice noticing? During prayers of the people, encourage congregants to share their own needs and struggles, as well as the needs and challenges they have noticed in their neighborhoods. Include a call to action before the benediction that invites people to walk around their neighborhoods and pray for what they notice during the upcoming week. Offer an opportunity to follow up next week during Sunday school or small-group time to see what people noticed and discern how God might be calling individuals or the church to act.

The other aspect of paying attention in today's texts is paying attention to God. Taking time to wait on God—not waiting on God to act, but paying attention to God who is always with us for no other reason than to be and to be revived. Here is where worship can help us move beyond solely or primarily transactional interactions with God. Carve out space in worship to simply enjoy God's presence. This may look like sitting in quiet, or you might invite the congregation into a simple prayer practice that is accompanied by gentle music or a sung chorus. If you begin worship by declaring the glory and the wonder of God, what might it look like to declare God's love and wonder back to the gathered people? However you choose to embody this sense of paying attention in worship, keep in mind how you might translate the practice that occurs in worship into a resource, a prayer practice, or a meditation for the congregation to use during the week, as well. Paying attention is not reserved for Sundays. It is a necessary part of working out our salvation daily as we become the people of God.

PREACHING NOTES

“But those who wait for the Lord...” (Isaiah 40:31). What exactly does this mean, do you think? How can we wait for the Lord? Or aren’t we always waiting for the Lord? It is our condition of life, really. Everything we do involves waiting for the Lord. We pray and then we wait. We work and then we wait. We get on with our lives, yet all the while, we are waiting to see what will happen – what the Lord will do. We can’t force God’s action on anything. We can’t ensure that God will respond to our requests in any way that is visible to us. So, waiting on the Lord is what it means to live in the world. Right? We’re always waiting.

Take another look at these verses from Isaiah. Maybe we’re in the wrong mode of waiting. Isaiah doesn’t seem to be asking us to wait for God to act. Instead, there seems to be a call to recognize who God is. Have you not known? Have you not heard? Isaiah is asking us to go back to our fundamental understanding of the nature of God. The presence of God. The reality of God. He goes back to the beginning; he looks at the ground beneath our feet. God is a part of all of it. God is the source of all of it—the source of you.

Isaiah is not *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett’s somewhat nihilistic play. We aren’t invited to become Vladimir and Estragon waiting in vain for the mysterious Godot to arrive and give meaning to their shabby existence. In the play, of course, Godot never comes and proves that waiting is useless and that we should give up and rely on our own resources rather than waiting for something from the outside to come and rescue us. Many of those outside the faith issue a similar indictment against the people of God, saying we are waiting for something that will never come.

But Isaiah isn’t using “wait” in this way. Rather, the prophet is asking us to pay attention to what already is. We are asked to know that God is among us, around us, within us already. Waiting on the Lord, in this case, means trusting, relying on, and being confident in the Lord. We lean into the reality that says God is equipping us as we learn and grow as disciples, as we become those who have heard and those who know. We see God at work all around us, through the encounters and relationships of the people of God. We wait on God as we wait on those in need around us. Remember, Jesus told us that as we serve – feed, tend, visit, invite – others, we are serving him. He is among us, and we are waiting on – serving – him.

There is power in that service. You’ve seen it. You’ve experienced it or heard about it in testimonials or mission reports about how the strength to go beyond ability and endurance came about because of the desire to serve, to be in mission together in community. You’ve heard or felt that mounting up with wings like eagles from those who report that they received more than they gave, that they were blessed more than they blessed others. That’s the strength that comes from waiting on the Lord, being aware of the Lord’s presence as one works and gives and loves. There is always more, an abundance of resources, when the people of God decide to pool together to partner with God in building the kin-dom.

Simon’s mother-in-law is a perfect example of this. She is sick with a fever, but at the touch of Jesus’ hand, she gets up and begins to serve. Did you notice that? She didn’t get up and salute her good health. She didn’t get up and celebrate her good fortune or her personal blessing or the lucky happenstance. No, the only response that made sense to her in that moment was to serve others. She literally began to wait on the Lord after rising from her sickbed. What a witness! How many others saw her example, one wonders. The crowd that gathered, the sick and possessed, the whole city, Mark says, gathered around

the door waiting on the Lord. And he cured many, Mark says. Many, but perhaps not all. There is nothing, however, to indicate that some were worthy and some were not. We shouldn't speculate too much on why all were not healed. Maybe Mark really meant all, but even he had trouble believing it. Was it all? The whole city? Surely not.

Either way, Jesus used the power he had, and then he needed to recharge. Mark says Jesus got up, which means, at some point, he went down. Maybe he fell down, exhausted. Mark's Jesus strains to do mighty works. He groans. This took something out of him. Maybe he staggered into the recently vacated bed of Simon's mother-in-law and fell asleep, and he would on that boat crossing the Sea of Galilee in a storm. But he got up while it was still dark. Was that so he could slip away without being asked for more than he had to give at that moment? Did he carefully step around the whole city that was sleeping on the ground outside the house waiting for him to regain his strength enough to start again? Or had they all gone away, satisfied or not that their waiting was worth it?

It didn't matter, in a way, because Jesus had a singular focus in the moment: time with God. He knew what it was to wait on the Lord. He knew the effort it required and the focus it needed. He knew that the only way to walk and not faint, to run and not be weary, is to continually take time to be with God, to set aside everything else to fully be present with the source of his strength and direction. He knew his wings would come only when he would wait on the Lord.

And what happened when the disciples showed up? They said, "Everyone is looking for you." That must have meant that there were more people there, back at the house, wanting Jesus, needing him. But Jesus says, "I'm moving on." Is that harsh? I'll bet the ones waiting back at the house thought so. But notice the focus on mission that Jesus expresses to his disciples: "so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came to do." *That is what I came to do.* The healing is extra, a sign or pointer to the essence of the message he came to deliver. The message was what he said, but also what – and who – he was. And he needed to be moving on so that more would hear and know and be able to find their place in God's kingdom, which was breaking out around them.

We might argue that since he had already spoken to those around Simon's mother-in-law's house that they had what they needed. They could work to resolve the outstanding issues of the human community together. Just like we, while we are waiting on the Lord, are also called to be a part of the healing of community and the becoming of the people of God by making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. It is not, however, our responsibility to make excuses for what might seem like questionable behavior on Jesus' part. It is what it is. A part of waiting on the Lord means not getting caught up in what we can't understand or explain. Instead, we trust that he did what he was called to do. Just as we must do what we are called to do. These are wings we fly with, as the people of God we are becoming. The wings of call, the wings of service, the wings of love that bring us into the kingdom we seek to embrace and promote. So, let us walk and not be wearied; let us run and not faint as we seek to represent the God upon whom we wait.

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