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Epiphany 2 Series A 2017

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Second Sunday after Epiphany, Jan 15

The Sundays after Epiphany expand and contract to allow the feast of Easter with its 40 days of Lenten preparation and 50 days of Resurrection celebration to float around in our calendar. The preacher might be tempted to think that this makes the Epiphanytide less important, but he would be mistaken. In fact, the seasons of the Church year are all working in a very interesting and important symbiosis with each other. Yes, Epiphany makes room for Easter's migratory habit, but it is never swallowed up completely. This year we get a nice long Epiphany season. In fact, you may think it is too long after you have preached the Sermon on the Mount for a few weeks.

The message of these next couple months is intense. The Babe of Bethlehem is revealed to be no ordinary child and man. He is the very Son of God. The baptism of Jesus gets that underway rather nicely as the voice from the heavens says as much. The season will end on a similar note, the festival of the Transfiguration, depicting that voice again proclaiming him the beloved Son of God, a fact which we noted in the discussions last week. The Sundays between these two festivals demonstrate to us convincing signs that this Jesus is the real thing.

For the writers of the Gospels there were a number of things which pointed to Christ's divinity:

- 1. Miracles – There were other miracle workers in the Old Testament and even some who were contemporaries of Jesus but whose record is not in the Bible. (One Jewish Rabbi, in a time of drought, drew a circle around himself in the dirt and said that he would not leave until it rained, which it did.) But Jesus' miracles are distinctive both in their nature/character and their frequency. Elisha will feed a hundred men with a few loaves of bread, Jesus will feed 5000. The sheer volume of demoniacs cleansed, blind given their sight, dead raised, deaf whose ears are opened, suggests that Jesus is on a completely different scale than any of the miracle workers of his time. Also his miracles over the elements of nature, the calming the storm, Peter walking on water, turning water into wine, suggest that the elements of nature themselves are owing him as master. We will see this Jesus as the one who can answer prayers spoken to him. This is another element of this. Not only does he have the power, but prayer can be addressed straight to him. Often he does not pray for a healing, but he just lays his hands upon the poor victim and they are restored. That is a God sort of thing to do.*
- 2. Crowds – Jesus sees phenomenal success as a charismatic leader. The people of Palestine flock to him. He gathers men from fishing boats and tax collection booths, from under fig trees and all sorts of places to follow him. The rich, the poor, the scoundrel and the Pharisee (Nicodemus) are all attracted to him. Isaiah had foretold that the servant would draw men to himself.*
- 3. Authoritative Witnesses – It might sound odd, but the demons are the most authoritative witnesses to the person of Jesus. But there are others too. The demons are residents of the world of the Spiritual beings. They are not bound by our earthly*

senses. They may not be trustworthy, but they are also able to know some things that we cannot see. Universally in the Bible they acknowledge Jesus as their enemy, judge, and finally the one who will destroy them. The other authoritative witnesses however include John the Baptist, the Centurion who nails him to the cross, even the High Priest, another enemy, who admits that his death is to save to the people (John 11)

- 4. Teaching – This is a facet of Christ we often overlook. Oriental cultures hold teachers in reverence and awe. To an Asiatic Indian, there are three people who deserve to be treated like God: your parents, your teacher, and the guest in your home. The consistent picture of Jesus in the Gospels is a teacher. The crowds come not only because he is healing and driving out the demons, but also to hear what he says. In a world that is filled with the chatter of 24 hour news shows and all of us are compelled to attend school, the idea of “teacher” has lost something of that ancient character. For the people of Jesus time, that he teaches with authority, without footnoting another scholar but simply says what he says, is amazing to them. Again and again the teaching of Jesus will amaze the people who are there. Have we lost the ability to be amazed by Jesus?*

In the coming weeks the season of Epiphany will depict Jesus in one or more of these ways. The goal here is to show you that the child born in Bethlehem of humble status is really something special, unique in the world. This is important because when Lent arrives he will set his face resolutely to Jerusalem and its cross. If he is not a peculiar human being, holy and divine, his death will not mean a thing for us 2000 years later. But if it really was the moment when God walked the earth as a man, that man’s death has cosmic significance. It will demand our repentance and our celebration upon his resurrection.

The Epiphany season also has a strong evangelistic and missional core. The revelation of Jesus to the world is for a purpose, namely that all men and women might see and believe. This is a great time of the year to start a new member class. This is also the time of the year to be inviting folks to come. There are many ideas for how to do this, think now about how you will invite your community to Holy Week, Easter, Mother’s Day, and other celebratory events which are really just around the corner in spring time. Perhaps you want to just have a “bring a friend” Sunday in April. These readings for the next couple of weeks will be very helpful to inspire you and your people to plan and make ready for that.

Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, who governs all things in heaven and on earth, mercifully hear the prayers of your people and grant us your peace through all our days; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This prayer starts us out with God's power. He is almighty and he does not wear out, he is everlasting. He is in charge, governing with the authority which flows from his power and the fact that he is the creator of all. That is a lot of power. We appeal for God to hear us "mercifully" which is only right. After all, we are helpless before his power and before the power of our mutual enemies. We need his help. When the righteous and powerful bend to help the weak and guilty, that is the very definition of mercy.

Even the act of God listening to us, however, is an act of mercy. He really ought not to listen to us by right. We of ourselves have no claim upon the ear of God. Indeed, fairness should have shut that ear to us and our prayer. But God is merciful, so the prayer is spoken with confidence.

We ask him to grant us "his peace" through all our days.

What do you suppose his peace looks like and how does one know one has "his" peace and not another's peace? What other peace is there? Can the world give me peace? Can I gin some peace up from within myself? I imagine that they can; although, I suspect this will always be a cheap-jack imitation peace. But if I only know turmoil in my life, I think even the peace that comes from self-discipline, or the peace that comes from the brutal rule of a tyrant or a despot might feel like an improvement in some chaotic situations.

*We pray for God's peace. That peace flows out of the cross of Christ, through the work, ministry, sacrifice, resurrection, and Spirit of Jesus. That peace comes not from my getting it right, but from His getting it right. That peace speaks my righteousness, not my sin. That peace declares me to be something; it does not lay some unattainable goal before me. *It would be a mistake to think that God tolerates us. He delights in us and that because Christ has given us his righteousness.* That peace is not found in the striving after a self-wrought perfection, but it empowers a much more profound and serious striving to live out the perfection that God has given us. This is not born of anxiety and trepidation at the prospect of failure, but is borne out of the sure and certain faith that God has succeeded in Christ.*

But what is peace, God's peace that is? We probably need to start with the Hebrew word "Shalom" which involved much more than just the absence of war. Shalom was much more holistic, encompassing the entire human being and that human's relationships with God, self, and others. That said, we struggled to come up with a definition of peace or even examples of it. We share the peace in Church, but we are not even able to articulate what we are doing there. What do our people actually think they are doing when they turn to the folks in the pew and shake their hands, greet them, and smile.

*We thought that this peace had to be rooted in forgiveness, in the potent working of Christ in us and through us. We proclaim peace, but that is another way of proclaiming Jesus. Jesus is our peace! (Eph 2) If it is my peace, or a peace that comes from me, then it will fail. When you put skin on the concept of peace, it always really looks like Jesus. Jesus is the flesh and bones of the word peace. *Perhaps we need to share the peace in our liturgies right after the Absolution. I**

knew a very liturgical fellow who insisted on processing with cross, Gospel book, candles, the whole deal every Sunday. He conducted the service of confession and absolution and afterwards shared the peace all the way down the aisle to the entrance of the church at which point he bid them to turn and face the cross for the processional.

When we share the peace, what do we share? Is it good feelings and thoughts? Or is it something real/actual that we are conveying to one another? How do our people perceive this?

The peace of God that surpasses all human understanding keeps your hearts and minds with Christ Jesus. The preacher who is attracted to this peace may well want to preach the Epistle lesson today. Paul's letter to the Corinthians opens up with Paul crediting a really interesting co-author for this letter. We don't usually pay much attention to these things, but today we really want to. The "peace on earth" which adorned our Christmas cards might just come to life today.

Readings *I have once again included a little extension of this reading. I am not sure why the editors cut it where they did, but the next verses logically seem to go with this.*

Isaiah 49:1-7

Listen to me, O coastlands,
and give attention, you peoples from afar.
The LORD called me from the womb,
from the body of my mother he named my name.

² He made my mouth like a sharp sword;
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow;
in his quiver he hid me away.

³ And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

⁴ But I said, "I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my right is with the LORD,
and my recompense with my God."

⁵ And now the LORD says,
he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him;
and that Israel might be gathered to him—
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—

⁶ he says:
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob

and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

⁷ Thus says the LORD,
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation,
the servant of rulers:
“Kings shall see and arise;
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves;
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

⁸ *Thus says the LORD:*
“In a time of favor I have answered you;
in a day of salvation I have helped you;
I will keep you and give you
as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land,
to apportion the desolate heritages,
⁹ *saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’*
to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’
They shall feed along the ways;
on all bare heights shall be their pasture;
¹⁰ *they shall not hunger or thirst,*
neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them,
for he who has pity on them will lead them,
and by springs of water will guide them.
¹¹ *And I will make all my mountains a road,*
and my highways shall be raised up.
¹² *Behold, these shall come from afar,*
and behold, these from the north and from the west,
and these from the land of Syene.”

Are you noticing something here? Since the First Sunday in Advent, we have had Isaiah as our OT reading every week, except for the Circumcision and Naming of our Lord. We will continue with Isaiah until Epiphany 4 when Isaiah’s contemporary, Micah, will be the reading.

Three years ago we wondered about the identification of the “me” in the first verses. Is it the prophet, is it Jesus? Who is it? Isaiah seems to best be read with multiple referents here. Sometimes in these servant songs it sounds like the prophet, other times it seems to be referring

to the whole nation, other times clearly it is Jesus. Yet, there is another possibility: Us. The body of Christ in this place, the Church could also be the referent here. Take a moment to change the pronouns to those that refer to you. Has God hidden you away in the pews of Peace or Redeemer or Holy Cross Lutheran Church? Are you a polished arrow in that quiver? The preacher who reads it this way may want to challenge his hearers to ask whether we have set our sights so low that we miss the big picture of God's call to us. Are we really just supposed to go to Church on Sunday and be nice? Is that really it?

The words we read this day are another of the servant songs from Isaiah; the song builds on the song which we heard last week. The basic idea put forward here is that the servant of the LORD has a great task in front of him, the restoration of Israel which has been chastised in the Exile. Isaiah knows that his people are probably wondering if this can ever be done. Their downfall has been so complete that it has utterly shattered their hope.

Of course, what is hard for us, is simple for God. The servant he has chosen to restore the nation will be bored with such a small thing. He will not only save the people of Israel but he will also be the salvation of the entire world. For Isaiah's original audience, this was a way to say that the servant is up to the task. For the folks who hear this today, the vast majority of which are not Jewish, it is gospel of another sort. We are the people now included.

Epiphany reveals Jesus as the servant of God who brings people into the fold. The nations of the earth, mighty kings and noble princes shall bow low before him, because God has chosen him. (Remember the Gospel lesson last week in which God declared Jesus to be his beloved Son.)

Listen to me, O Coastlands... just who is Isaiah talking about here? Probably the Greeks! The amount of travel and trade between 8th century Phoenicia and the peoples of the Greek islands was considerable. Often we read our classical history and our biblical history and forget that these two people groups lived right next door to each other. This is compounded by the fact that our biblical histories refer to the Phoenicians as Canaanites. We know by the pottery we find in archaeological digs that these Phoenicians and Greeks were trading with one another.

Verses 1-3 describe the servant of the Lord with a military metaphor akin to Paul's use of armor in Colossians and Ephesians. He is a sharpened sword, he is a polished arrow hidden away in a quiver (Mary?) for the right moment in the battle to be fought. The servant is Israel in whom God is glorified. You can see how many within the Jewish community continue to perceive the community as the messianic fulfillment, not a single individual. They perceive the Jewish people as the leaven by which God blesses all the families of the earth. I think they are profoundly wrong and Paul did too, but you can see how they might come to that conclusion from this chapter. It is, after all, not far off the truth. Jesus was the nation of Israel reduced to one person. That is why he relived the Jewish history personally, according to Matthew, going down to Egypt for a sojourn and returning to the Promised Land.

In verse 4 the servant questions his mission but states his faith in God. Even though appearances do not look like he has achieved much, the final outcome lies in God's hands and he will be vindicated. The servant clearly does not look like he has triumphed, it is not clear, not even to him. He has reason to be discouraged, but God's word and work give hope. We call this the Theology of the Cross. God's method often looks like failure.

This attitude is then rewarded by God with a bigger job. The Lord says that because it is too small a thing to restore the house of Jacob and Israel, he is also the one to bring all the people of the earth to the salvation of God; he will be the light of the world. Of course, this is now talking about Jesus, not the aggregate community of Jewish people but the Jesus who is found not in synagogues but in churches and all the Christians of the world.

A couple of things bear discussion here. When Isaiah is writing this, no matter which Isaiah you subscribe to, the tribes of Jacob, the nation of Israel have long been decimated and are scattered to the four winds. They are gone. This is not just talking about the restoration of the Jews who are in exile, but the imagery here is of the tribes of Israel, the lost ones. This is a re-creation of the people of God; this is not a resuscitation of a moribund community or a mere gathering of a scattered community. This is a resurrection of a whole nation that has been lost and there are tribes which cannot even be found.

Then of course, we also need to spend a little time with the whole issue of the light of the world. Isaiah says he is speaking to one whom the nations abhor, that would in fact fit for the people of Israel in exile, but think also of the scourged and beaten Christ here. He is not pleasant to look at. Isaiah will explore this more fully in chapter 53, just four short chapters away from this. There the servant will be smitten and stricken, and we will turn our faces away from him like one who has been cursed, a person with a terrible birth defect. But there have also been many times when the Church under persecution has given people occasion to look away.

The result of this is that God will bring kings and princes, people from all over to bow down and worship, to prostrate themselves, before you. I am reminded of stories my colleague Herb Hoefler has told about people in India crawling up the aisles in certain Christian churches because they believe that prayers are heard there.

I am not necessarily advocating such practices in your churches, but I wonder if we have not lost something by the virtual banishment of physicality from our worship in many respects. I notice increasingly that people do not stand for elements of worship such as prayer and the hearing of the Gospel read. It is not commanded, true, but is it perhaps simply good for us to use our bodies to worship as much as our minds. After all, Jesus died for the whole package.

What sermon shall we see here in this lesson? Is it the sermon of our God including us in the sacred story? That certainly has legs to preach. Could we proclaim that God has made us into the servant today? Do we suffer from a myopia which only sees that our Sunday school is shrinking, attendance is down, and the offerings are down? Has God indeed sent us here to

reach into the whole of our city, our community, indeed the whole world? Too often our congregations have such a small vision for our ministry. It is as if we have not done a good job of being a congregation, and that makes us feel discouraged. So God gives us a much larger vision. We often think we supposed care for our little world, but God has so much more in mind for us.

This is hard. Sometimes visionaries are raised up and they get beaten down. Sometimes there is not consistency. Sometimes there just is no vision.

Notice that the servant sounds discouraged here, he has spent his strength for no purpose. God's answer to the discouraged servant is to give him a much larger task!

Psalm 40:1-11 This reading too suffers from editorial decisions. I have added the next verse which completes the thought.

I waited patiently for the LORD;

he inclined to me and heard my cry.

² He drew me up from the pit of destruction,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.

³ He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the LORD.

⁴ Blessed is the man who makes
the LORD his trust,
who does not turn to the proud,
to those who go astray after a lie!

⁵ You have multiplied, O LORD my God,
your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us;
none can compare with you!
I will proclaim and tell of them,
yet they are more than can be told.

⁶ In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted,
but you have given me an open ear.
Burnt offering and sin offering
you have not required.

⁷ Then I said, "Behold, I have come;
in the scroll of the book it is written of me:

⁸ I delight to do your will, O my God;
your law is within my heart.”

⁹ I have told the glad news of deliverance
in the great congregation;
behold, I have not restrained my lips,
as you know, O LORD.

¹⁰ I have not hidden your deliverance within my heart;
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;
I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness
from the great congregation.

¹¹ As for you, O LORD, you will not restrain
your mercy from me;
your steadfast love and your faithfulness will
ever preserve me!

¹² *For evils have encompassed me
beyond number;
my iniquities have overtaken me,
and I cannot see;
they are more than the hairs of my head;
my heart fails me.*

I Corinthians 1:1-9

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,

² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—
⁶ even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸ who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

The green seasons return us to the practice of reading the epistles in a semi-continuous fashion. The readings in Epiphany concentrate on the letters of Paul to the people in Corinth. If you want to preach a little miniseries on these letters, this is the time to start. This is true this year like no other since we actually get sections of I Corinthians we don't always get because the season is longer.

The opening words of I Corinthians are a really powerful text, probably the most interesting address of any of the letters of Paul, except perhaps the letter to the Romans. The real meat comes in the name of his co-author. You can read this story in Acts 18. While in Corinth Paul runs afoul of the Jewish community. He had been kicked out of the synagogue and, in a maneuver which may have been calculated but certainly was inflammatory, Paul set up a competing Christian synagogue next door. To the dismay of the Jewish community, the Synagogue ruler, essentially the congregational president, followed Paul to the new location. The remaining Jews were furious. They elected a new leader, likely because he offered up the most aggressive plan for what to do with this trouble-maker Paul. At the instigation the Jews, Paul was hauled into court before the Roman Proconsul, a man named Gallio, who was also the brother-in-law of Seneca, the famous philosopher and advisor to the current emperor, Nero. The Jews of Corinth were trying to do to Paul what the Jews in Jerusalem did to Jesus. They lay a charge of sedition against Paul before the governor, with the likely intent that Gallio would have him arrested, perhaps executed as happened to Jesus. It doesn't work. Gallio dismisses the case against Paul as a religious dispute which has no standing in a Roman court. The members of the Jewish synagogue then turn against their leader, the man who had brought the suit, their attorney of sorts, and beat him in front of the court building and Gallio just watches all of this. The beaten synagogue ruler's name was Sosthenes.

I don't know if you have ever been sued or not, but it is not a pleasant experience. For me it was simply the threat of a lawsuit, but it was enough to churn my guts. I still don't know what I would do if that fellow showed up on my doorstep. I hope my faith would be strong and I would recognize that Jesus died for the man and there is nothing between us now. I am not sure, however, that I would not punch him.

I envision the scene in Corinth this way, but really have no idea if it transpired like this. Sosthenes is lying in the dust, bruised, bloody, and beaten by his own fellow Jews. The Romans won't help him. The members of the Synagogue surely won't. It is then that a hand reaches down to him and a voice says, "Sosthenes, let's go home and get you cleaned up." It's Paul. In the Epistle reading, Paul puts his arm around the man who tried to have the Romans kill him and calls that man a brother. "Father forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." can be a terribly frightening concept if you get right down to it. As C. S. Lewis once said, most everyone is in favor of forgiveness until they have to do it themselves.

Paul addresses these words to a conflicted congregation, a congregation whose healing he wanted to effect through these words. Notice how he leads by example. The man who brought him to trial is now a brother. See what Jesus can do? There is no conflict in the congregation in Corinth that is bigger than the forgiveness of Jesus. If Paul can call Sosthenes a brother, they can be united in the love that is found in Christ.

The basic evangelistic message of Epiphany is well served by this. The greatest detriment to the evangelistic outreach of the church in North America, I am convinced, is that we have forgotten

the essential power of forgiveness to give us love and joy. If I am angry or hurt by my fellow congregant, I am loathe to bring a friend to that place. But if that place is the place where forgiveness reigns in my life, I can with joy bring a friend or even an enemy because in Christ there are no enemies. This true forgiveness which Christ works is amazing for its ability to instill passion and life to congregations. The hard part is often the first part – we have to honestly own up to our own sins and the sins of others. It will not feel “nice” to do so, but the end results are far better than feeling nice, they are positively divine.

The preacher which keeps in mind the collect of the day which asks God for peace might find in Paul the very illustration of the peace that God gives. He has no enemies. Even Sosthenes who tried kill Paul was not an enemy. He was made a brother and called as much in this reading. Can we preach that this peace comes to us? Can we live a radically different sort of community in this place which knows no enemies, only people for whom Jesus has died and forgiven? What would our community look like if we received the answer to prayer we prayed? What would it look like if we lived this way? Would that be attractive to this cynical world? I think so.

This is rooted in the prayer of thanksgiving that Paul prays here. They have already been given a grace from God. This grace has enriched them in all speech and knowledge and now they lack no good thing. Even though, the reason for the letter is that their speech is impoverished. They are treating one another terribly. Despite their behavior he thanks God that they are totally equipped by God with every spiritual gift. He has given them what it takes to turn their enemies into brothers. They have the equipment, the love, the forgiveness, the words to say. Jesus will keep them guiltless to the end. God has brought them into the fellowship of his Son. Notice the tense of those verbs.

I believe that with the Sosthenes piece and this prayer there is a great sermon in here about the speaking of forgiveness. We have been given every gift, the same gifts that Paul had, we can forgive. This could be a great sermon to introduce/proclaim the Office of the Keys. We have the ability to forgive sins, and if we don't forgive them, they don't get forgiven. It is a little like baptism, if we don't splash the water and say the words, the baptism doesn't happen. If we don't forgive the person, that person might not hear those words. Of course, if we are unwilling to forgive the penitent sinner, we have a 5th petition of the Lord's Prayer problem.

But I would preach this sermon as an empowerment sermon, we are empowered to forgive sins. We have the gift from God to forgive someone and make a brother out of an enemy. That is a spiritual gift.

The balance of the text is really important as well. Paul speaks of them as being rich in Christ, they are well equipped. Paul speaks of Jesus' presence. He will be revealed, notice that is different that his “second coming” which supposes he is not here. One reveals what is here all along. Jesus is right there; their peace is right there. He sustains them, righteous until the end. Corinth being a very conflicted congregation probably felt pretty unworthy. But Paul never calls them that. He points to the Jesus who is there, who will make them right.

John 1:29-42a

²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ³¹ I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³² And John bore witness: “I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. ³³ I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

³⁵ The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, “What are you seeking?” And they said to him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹ He said to them, “Come and you will see.” So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹ He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). ⁴² He brought him to Jesus. *Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter).*

Sermon potentials:

- 1. The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world – a sermon on sin, the full meaning of that word which describes all of our broken condition, not just the naughtiness we usually associate with it. Jesus heals the sick, raises the dead, cleanses the leper, calms the storm, feeds the hungry, he is taking away sin the whole time.*
- 2. What are you seeking? Jesus noticed them following him. Look at the words of Jesus and the responses of the disciples at the end of the text. What are we seeking when we come to Church? What do we find? If you worked on the Magi a couple weeks ago, you might have a way to connect this. They looked for the infant Jesus. What are you looking for? Augustine’s opening paragraph in his Confession might be a good illustration – I was restless until I found rest in you. John has been pointing them to Jesus with the words we quote above – Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*
- 3. Evangelism sermon – Jesus turns Andrew into an evangelist. He brings his brother. A real evangelist is not someone who convinces or forces, but simply someone who invites and tells what he or she has seen. “Come and see what we have seen...”*
- 4. They stayed with him that day... The disciples are not so much doing something as they simply are with Christ. Our Christianity is not a matter of our doing but the one with*

whom we are found. They learn from him, they imitate him, but ultimately it is the proximity to him that matters.

What is the take-away for us in hearing John's attestation of Jesus? John calls him "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Not once, but twice he uses this formulation. This is the setting the scope of the mission – remember the servant in Isaiah – he had a big job laid upon his shoulders. There is also a measure of the theology of the cross here. Lambs took away sins by dying on an altar.

This Gospel is an expansion of the traditional reading for the second Sunday after the Epiphany. In the one year series which preceded the three year series, this Sunday always had us hearing the story of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding of Cana. In an effort to expand the body of Scripture which we hear, we have kept the early John reading, but now get two years from the end of chapter 1. These readings actually do belong together and you would do well to read them all. If you are willing to permit a brief excursus, let me show you how I think John's words and the wedding at Cana go together. The whole issue revolves around the "next day" phrase which shows up in John 1:29 and several more times. In the narrative of the chapter, this comes right after a confrontation between himself and the Pharisees. A careful counting of the next days reveals that in fact there should be four days, but then, in the opening verses of chapter 2 he says "on the third day." Does John have a problem with counting? Hardly, he is a fisherman, remember, a small business man. He knows how to count, if nothing else, he knows how to count the money the folks paid him for the fish he caught.

I believe something profoundly theological is going on here. John the author of the Gospel is actually in a parallel structure telling us the whole story. On the first of these days, John the Baptist points us toward Jesus and declares him to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the whole world. This sounds like Good Friday to me, when Jesus sacrificially dies for the sins of the whole world on the temple mount, the very place where Abraham nearly sacrificed Isaac, where countless lambs have been slain.

Then there are two next days, but really they are the same day because Jesus is doing the same thing. He is gathering disciples. In liturgical terms, the day after Good Friday is Holy Saturday. In the earliest days of the church, this was the day in which men and women were baptized. In some communities, we know they only baptized on this day unless there was an emergency. An entire year of baptisms happened at the great vigil of Easter, the eve of the resurrection. This was because Paul had said we were baptized into the death of Christ, or perhaps Paul is even reflecting the events of this text in his letter to the Romans. Is this practice that old, within the first generation of Christianity? We don't know. Most have operated from the assumption that liturgical practice was developed in the second and third generations of Christians at the earliest. But is that a valid assumption?

That hearing of the earlier "next day" lets the opening words of John 2 have their effect, on the third day there was a wedding feast, a picture of heaven itself, the resurrection, the foretaste of

the last day, the third day when Jesus rose from the dead. Here he changes the water into wine, the wine of sacramental participation in the resurrection, in the feast of heaven.

This is a very theological reading of John, but I think appropriate. As the last of the Gospels written and very deliberately shaped with a faith goal (see John 20:30-31), John was unapologetically telling a theological story here. He wanted his audience, who were mostly post-Jewish Christians, to see that their celebration of Easter was in fact a participation in the story of Christ. He is connecting his Gospel telling to their liturgical calendar.

So let me reiterate what I am saying here. I believe that John is deliberately telling the story of Jesus in a way that connects to the late first century Christian's liturgical calendar. The folks would have observed the death and celebrated the resurrection of Jesus in a three day festival, whose highpoint was the baptism of new converts. John begins his book by deliberately echoing that festival. Do you think I'm nuts? I am sure that there are academics out there who do.

There are a couple of more obvious things to say here.

John the last of the OT prophets directly points out Jesus. This authoritative figure connects the whole OT witness, the new Elijah, to the fulfillment that is Christ.

Jesus is gathering disciples. We don't make enough of this. Jesus is a very attractive figure. The ancient church and in many places around the world today, is filled with folks who are intensely attracted to Jesus, what he says, who he is, what he does. Jesus grips their imagination and minds. A recent book even suggested that young people love Jesus but not the Church. We are altogether too humdrum about Jesus. He is our best evangelism resource. The trouble for too many of us is that we have kept him at a distance lest he change our own lives. We don't know him all that well.

Law

1. We are the people who need God to gather us. Our own native sinfulness is an enormous God problem which has to be rectified. We may think this life we live is normal, but sickness and death, exhaustion and restlessness are not what God ever had in mind for us.
2. The sharp sword like tongue of Jesus, the servant of YHWH, speaks of our own rebellious and sinful heart. He cuts us to the quick. Why are the pagans sometimes more righteous than we are in their sacrifices to idols and their pursuit of heaven through works? Are we not motivated by the much more potent love of God, the desire to please the one who has demonstrated his love for us? Yet we give on average 2% of our income and grumble about coming to worship or serving on a committee at Church. We have the temerity to harp about the music when God himself is in our midst and resides in our hand and enters us through the sacrament.

3. Our churches are not growing. Is that because we have lost our first love? Have we forgotten what it means to be a Christian? Have we forgotten that the love of God courses through our veins? Have we grown stale and stagnant because we love our sins a little too much and are thus unwilling to let Jesus really govern our lives? Is the cause of Christianity's stagnation within the United States due to our unwillingness to be forgiven and hence our inability to be forgivers of those who sin against us?
4. Perhaps the lack of passion among us is due to the fact that we have grown too comfortable with the bandage sorts of solutions that we have concocted to deal with the realities of the broken world. Our physicians can medicate our pain, our funeral home industry shields us from actually encountering death, the many conveniences of life can indeed make it seem more pleasant, and at least we are given that tantalizing vision by Madison Avenue. But these are all bandage solutions. Death does come, sometimes with great pain. Weariness and emptiness are often the lot of people. Are they calls to think differently about our lives?
5. We often think too little of ourselves. We think we are just a little place, what could anyone want with us. Have we missed the fact that we are not the attraction here? Jesus is, he has promised to live in us. We are the manifestation of Christ himself to this community.
6. We have therefore sometimes been all too silent about our own faith. We have looked at our own resources instead of Christ. We have looked at the meager abilities that I have instead of the amazing attractiveness of the Son of God.

Gospel

1. God has gathered his people from the ends of the earth and we have been among that number. The mission of Christ was not to save just the physical children of Abraham, but also the children of Adam and Eve, to fulfill that promise of Genesis 3 in which Satan's head would be crushed. Today 100,000 new Christians are made, 3 million this month, 36 million this year.
2. The question "Why" does not bring comfort, that comfort comes only from Jesus, sometimes God gathers us to strange places, a community center, for a memorial service for a young girl. God has amazing ways of gathering people.
3. God has not called us because we get it right, but often because we are so profoundly broken. Jesus was found among the sick, the weak, the sinners. Our sins do not disqualify us for being numbered among his people, but his great love does qualify us and has therein the power to transform us. He sees every day as a day to lift our lives out of the mire of sin and to set us on the right track. He does not get discouraged by

our failings, his love is so great. *I grabbed this and the next one from the epistle lesson*

4. He has called us to a community that is not marked by the DNA of Abraham but by the faith of Abraham and the faith of Jesus. This community is marked by the forgiveness which Christ won on that cross. The forgiveness he puts into our mouths at the rail, which has washed us clean in baptism, which has been proclaimed in the absolution this morning transforms our congregations into the vibrant and attractive places. This world is in desperate need of what Jesus has to offer, especially the unconditional and forgiving love which has always been the hallmark of his kingdom. That love first reigns among us and then, when it has transformed this communion, it transforms how people see us. It cannot but be so, for we will see ourselves so differently. This community is based on forgiveness instead of a constitution and bylaws.
5. This is good, for the forgiveness which we can now enjoy is but a foretaste of the great act of God on the last day when he dries all the tears. The pain, the death, the weariness and the exhaustion will all pass away on that day as we are restored to Eden's beauty. For now, though we are still in the world, we are able to enjoy one part of that perfect life, we have God's perfect love to share with one another. We may forgive. John called his hearers, Paul called his hearers, Isaiah called the coastlands to hear a new kingdom proclaimed in Christ.

Sermon Themes

1. The "Gathering" of Jesus. (From the OT/Gospel lesson – that the Spirit of God opens the eyes and ears of the congregant to see Jesus revealed in this place and respond to his gathering call.)

This sermon could play into the "Who are you seeking" idea we talked about under the Gospel lesson.

This sermon really works off of a Word play/pun – gathering is both a verb – Jesus gathers us and the noun – we are a gathering of people which belongs to Jesus.

He has gathered us together just as he gathered those first disciples. That same Jesus has spoken to us just like he did those disciples of so long ago. That is my story too. This sermon wants to assert that the same Jesus who gathered disciples long ago, whom Isaiah saw reaching into the coastlands of the Gentiles, that Jesus has gathered this group of folks into this place today.

Robert Jensen wrote an article in which he talked about the three act play. The Old Testament is the first act; the New Testament is the second act and my life is the third act. My baptism was the moment when I encountered this same Jesus whom John the Baptist pointed out, whom those first disciples followed, and to whom they brought Peter. The essay is in a book entitled *The Art of Reading Scripture* edited by Hayes and Davis.

This sermon also wants to open the eyes of the believer to see that this is a divine act, this congregation, this gathering, and hence a sacred act. In this scientific age in which we live, we too often have describe the mystery right out of life. More than one person has tried to articulate all the sociological reasons that people go to church. If think they are loopy, but that does not stop them.

I regularly find students who believe that a human being is simply a collection of chemical and electrical interactions which transpire inside their fleshly brains. But that no more describes a human being than “some paint on a canvas” describes the Mona Lisa. I teach a class on J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. Aragorn speaks to a disbelieving Eomer in the first chapters of “The Two Towers.” Eomer is having a hard time with the fact that Aragorn has revealed himself to be the long lost king, unsheathed his ancient sword, etc. “Do we walk in legends or on the green earth in daylight?” asked Eomer. Aragorn replied, “A man may do both...The green earth, say you? That is a mighty matter of legend, though you tread it under the light of day.” Do we really believe it when someone says to us “Take and eat, the body of Christ”? Do we imagine that we take the very Lord of the universe inside ourselves in that act?

This sermon wants the hearer to stand in awe of the Church, the gathering of Jesus. It seems so mundane, so plain and simple, often sullied by our sins and without much to commend it. C. S. Lewis talks about our perceptions of the Church in *Mere Christianity* and *The Screwtape Letters*. But God does not see it that way at all. He calls it his beloved bride. The old man without his teeth and who sings off key at the end of your pew may be mighty in prayer, he might be an instrument through which God has saved hundreds of people, fed thousands, or simply cared for one important little person. In any event, do not judge this assembly by its externals. Work for its health, but esteem it in the eyes of God.

In truth, such an estimation will go far toward your ability to work for its health. If you think it can get its corporate act together of its own, you are deceived. That will take God and his work happens best when his people have great expectations and mighty hope in his deeds. See the gathering of Jesus for what it really is. He has made saints of every person in this room today. He has fed them at his table. He has united

them with his very flesh. He has called them his beloved. Who are you to say otherwise?

Jesus reveals his divinity in gathering people today. It is what the Son of God does. The simple fact that he has brought us here today, when we could have slept in, makes this a holy place, and a holy gathering. Christ has called, we have come. He is still gathering people. Today 100,000 new Christians are made. Since 1949 Christianity in China has grown from about 1,000,000 to over 120,000,000 adherents, and that is by communist government estimates. The most recent people's congress admitted that it was one of the three fundamental religions of China. Many Christians in the world today get discouraged when they hear of the radical growth of Mormonism. But in 1949 the LDS also had 1,000,000 members, roughly. Today they have 12,000,000. Christianity has outgrown that by ten times in China, without any missionaries, when most of the Chinese Christian church was illegal, underground, and under intense persecution. Jesus is still gathering people. You are the people whom he has gathered.

This sermon addresses the discouragement that a lot of people feel when they talk and think about church, especially in North America. They see their numbers shrinking, the kids are gone, their hearts are broken to see this place they love grow shabby and perhaps not able to pay a pastor or do the things they always thought would happen.

2. "And our brother, Sosthenes" (That the hearer would be empowered by Christ to forgive his/her neighbor, especially a fellow congregant.)

We will be reading the opening chapters of Paul's letter to conflicted congregation in Corinth. The first chapters take that conflict head on and you might find it a worthy sermon series for this season. I would recommend if you are thinking of this that you look up an overview to the letter in a good introduction to the New Testament or grab a commentary which will help you understand some of the back ground to this fascinating letter. We can reconstruct the back ground, correspondence, and relationship of Paul with this congregation better than just about any other document in the NT. Especially pay attention to chapter 15, the resurrection chapter. Many think that it serves as the key to the entire document.

We wondered if this sermon could not be preached right at the point of the confession and absolution. What if we moved this sermon to another spot in the service? We would not preach another one later when it said "sermon" in our hymnal, but we would re-use an old idea that there was a sermon at the confessional services. Then we would absolve and share the peace, the real peace, the sort of peace that Paul shared with Sosthenes, the sort of peace we pray for in the collect of the day: God peace.

We thought this sermon also needed to pay attention to the verses which are found at five and following. There Paul speaks of the wealth of the Corinthians, they are enriched, they lack no gift. Anger, conflict, and the sheer emotional energy which goes into bearing a grudge and hating leaves the human being weak and feeling impoverished. Conflict never builds up a person, but tears them down. Paul speaks of their wealth because they are feeling poor.

Paul speaks of Christ being revealed. Notice that he is not “coming” but he is revealed. The implication is that Jesus is right here. Is a big part of the conflict and poverty of people rooted in the idea that we think Jesus is far away, sitting on some throne in heaven and not paying attention to my life right now. Paul says that Jesus is right here, right now. He comes with this gifts of knowledge and words which make us rich. He gives us words of peace which are potent and work what they say. He gives us knowledge that that the blood of Christ has been shed for this person who is right in front of me, and who has hurt me by what they have said and done. He brings us the knowledge that the blood he shed so long ago is right here in this chalice for me to drink and for it to change my life into something beautiful today.

See the notes above under the text of the Epistle lesson for what I am trying to do with Sosthenes. The simple fact that Paul puts his arms around the man who once tried to kill him, calls him a brother, that is a powerful witness to what the love of God can do. It is able to overcome even this sort of hatred and spite.

The text and theme of the letter fit well into the Epiphany season, even into the themes drawn from the first sermon. Now we are the gathered people of God, created and defined by him. Drawn from every people and tribe, even the stinky ones, even the stinkers. “Lazarus, come out” he says. Now everything is different for us. This sermon remembers one important facet of that truth for the living of life as a congregation of people who all follow Jesus. There is no sin bigger than his forgiveness and there is no enemy to whom I cannot be reconciled. This servant named Jesus can recreate the lost tribes, Sosthenes can be a brother, even I am numbered among the disciples of Jesus and this also can be applied to my enemy.

The law development of this sermon really wants to focus on our failure to believe that we can do this. Sin hurts and our enemy, Satan, wants us to believe that guilt and the pain of sin are obstacles which mere words cannot overcome. He wants us to believe that Jesus is far away. He doesn't care about this, or if he does, he is simply keeping some black book which is a ledger of our mistakes. He is not here right now to help us. We must do something, we must even the scales, balance the situation, often with vengeance, grudge bearing, and spite. And even more pernicious solution is understanding. I am all for understanding, mind you, but it is not forgiveness. And while understanding can help us cope with many things, it really doesn't take the hurt

away like forgiveness and it eventually encounters the sinful hurt which defies our ability to understand. The human solutions to sin, be they the childish “get even” or the more civilized understanding are all built on a lie, a lie we too often believe. God has empowered our words. The forgiveness we speak is spoken by God too through us. [John 20 and Matthew 18 – the sins we forgive are forgiven in heaven!](#)

The gospel here is really the gift Jesus has given to all of us. We can speak powerful words which radically transform difficult and painful situations. “I forgive you” is the best thing to say about so much of life. It liberates us from the need to get even or to carry around some burden of guilt or grudge.

This too has an Epiphany theme. Our parishes are not growing in the LCMS. When they do grow, they for the most part are simply poaching members from other churches. But we could be a different sort of place in just this regard, a place that folks find enormously attractive. The world’s solutions to sin are failing us and we sit on a real solution but fail to practice it. Churches can be the best place to be when we forgive one another.

This is not easy. It requires vulnerability and the loss of some control. To admit one’s sins and be totally honest is a fearful thing for many people. It will have to be done with some pastoral sensitivity and probably slowly. But it can be done and has been done for two thousand years. It is one of the things that makes Christianity great.

3. Four statements – We thought that there was a sermon to be found in the motion/action of the Lord and these disciples at the end of the Gospel reading:
 - a. I have found Jesus
 - b. Where are you staying?
 - c. Come and see
 - d. They stayed with him

This sermon would see the parishioner/hearer delighting in Christ and having their lives changed forever – just as those disciples did long ago.

4. [What are you seeking? \(That Holy Spirit would focus the eyes of the hearer and tune their ears to Christ alone because he is the Lamb who takes away sin.\)](#)

[Our world looks for peace and fulfillment in all the wrong places. We think that having enough money or resources will finally give us peace. We think that having our family squared away, or perhaps that better relationship than we have right now, then we will have peace. We imagine that if only I get the promotion or we fire that other guy, then it will be good. As a church we can do the same thing. If only we get some young folks in here, some new members, some kids in Sunday School, then it](#)

will be better. Sometimes we get to see those things, other times we don't, but we don't really get any peace and rest and fulfillment out of these things. We are always restless and always seeking something, but it seems to be just beyond our reach.

Today John the Baptist looks to Jesus, points at him twice, and says that he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. That is a tall order. John's disciples finally get the hint, on the second day that seem to wake up and finally follow Jesus. God will likely have to do that with our people and even me too. I am a little thick when it comes to this stuff. But God is persistent. Guys and gals like John keep pointing me to Jesus.

But we will want to take note of what it is that John points to: The Lamb who is the answer to every problem this world has ever seen. He takes away the sin of the whole world – the death, sickness, pain, problems of every kind.

Our misled seeking leads to all sorts of problems. It makes us angry and bitter, hopeless and sad. Misdirected seeking is a problem. The preacher may need to develop that, but chances are he will be surfacing only what the people already know about themselves. He may need to give it a name, but it sometimes is best to let them make that final application leap. There is much seeking and little finding. Without Christ coming to us, we are not going to find him, even if we know what we are looking for and we don't, at least not until the Holy Spirit directs that search more pointedly.

Solomon's Ecclesiastes could be another resource. He sought meaning in pleasure, children, wealth, success, all sorts of things, but never found it "under the sun." it was all meaningless and vanity. But at the end of the book he notices that above the sun is God, and therein lies the real meaning. The man who labors and eats his bread in contentment because it is a gift of God, that man is blessed. He has found the Christ not in some strange place far away, but in the very place where Christ has met us, in our lives and homes, this font, this meal, this congregation, this Word.