

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany – Year C

RCL Readings – Isaiah 6:1-13; Psalm 138; I Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

ACNA Readings – Judges 6:11-24; Psalm 85; I Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

Seasonal Introduction. Following the Christmas season, Christians around the world celebrate Epiphany. While the story of a Jewish baby born in his ancestral home may be interesting it would hardly be remarkable, let alone world-changing. But Christmas isn't only about a human baby boy, it is about God coming to dwell among men as a man. During the season of Epiphany, we look at how God revealed Himself, starting with the pagan magi and ending with Jesus' transfiguration on the mountain. We also see that God calls ordinary, or extraordinary, people to reveal His message to the world as well.

Common Theme. God calls people to serve Him. Yes, God is all powerful. God is holy. God has a host of angels to serve Him. But God desires that we too would become His messengers, disciples, and children. We are not worthy of this calling, but God is powerful enough to cleanse us and gracious enough to do so. Some answer that call.

Hebraic Context. Worship of God is one of the cornerstones of the modern Church service—the praise service. Some of our most treasured hymns come from passages that reflect the worship of God in all places and all times. Today, the hymn presented in Isaiah, “Holy, holy, holy” is sung around the world as it has been for thousands of years. Worship of God is a cornerstone because it is clear that men, angels, and all of creation are expected to worship God. David knew this and assigned Levites to sing the praise of God in the Temple: morning, afternoon, and evening. We are following in this tradition (as we should). But it is possible that our understanding of worship, a moment of praise in a church service, is too narrow. Worship isn't just praise and thanksgiving.

Worship is the natural result of God's epiphanic actions. We see many kinds of worship in the Scriptures: Obeisance and fear, praise and thanks, even lamentation leading to repentance. The Scriptures often show worship through instruments and song but the word that, perhaps, highlights the Hebraic idea of worship best is אֲבוּדָה (*avodah*).

Avodah is usually translated as work. Words like *eved* (עֶבֶד, servant) are derived from *avodah*. Can work be the greatest form of worship? Psalm 138 shows us that praise and thanksgiving are an important form of worship. But, during the season of Epiphany, God isn't the only one displaying who He is—yes, God shows His glory to Isaiah; Jesus showed His power to Peter, James, and John (along with many other disciples) through miracles, healing, and teaching; He also showed His power through the resurrection—today we should note that God displayed who He is through the testimony of men He called. Epiphany leads to action which, in turn, continues to reveal God to the world.

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Isaiah sees the glory of God and then responds to God's desire for someone to share His revelation to Judah, "Here I am! Send me." Jesus showed His power to Peter, James, and John and then told them that they would become fishers of men and so, "they left everything and followed Him." Jesus appeared to Cephas, James, and Paul following His death and resurrection and so they preached to others what they received (and asked those to whom they preached to teach others). Yes, God is the LORD of hosts and could use an army of angels to display His power but He asks that sinful men join with Him in revealing the God of the universe to our neighbours.

Worship should not be easy, simple, or separate to our lives. Peter was martyred on a cross. James, the half-brother of Jesus, was killed below the Temple. Paul was beheaded. What is our spiritual worship but this, "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God."

Isaiah 6:1-13. Isaiah was an incredibly important prophet in Judah as his ministry stretched across the reign of four kings of Judah before, tradition states, he was murdered in the reign of a fifth king. Isaiah begins with 5 chapters of God's message of condemnation against Judah and Jerusalem before finally showing Isaiah's calling. This prophetic condemnation, even with Isaiah serving under good kings, such as Uzziah¹ and Hezekiah, doesn't stand alone—it is accompanied by messianic expectation and great promises of comfort and salvation.

Isaiah had a vision experience in which he saw into the throne room of heaven and encountered the Lord. As we know from other passages of Scripture, no man has seen God. Tractate *Yevamot* 49.6-8, from the Babylonian Talmud, includes a tradition that is reinforced in the book of Hebrews. King Manasseh, a king renowned for his evil ways, confronted Isaiah by first quoting from Exodus 33:20, "Man shall not see Me and live" and then stating that Isaiah had declared that he "saw the Lord sitting upon a throne." How could these two statements coexist? And so King Manasseh had Isaiah executed by sawing him in two.²

But what Isaiah actually describes is peripheral around the throne. Isaiah is able to describe the heavenly beings around God in some detail but not the Lord on the throne—on this he can only

¹ Isaiah 6 specifically occurs in the final year of the reign of Uzziah, king of Judah. His reign and history is found in 2 Chronicles 26. He began his rule aged 16 years following the murder of his father Amaziah in a coup. He is mostly renowned for being a good king with his reign spanning a lengthy 52 years. Uzziah was a man of faith, a seeker after the Lord, and was accompanied by the prophet Zechariah. However, he allowed sacrifice in the high places within the kingdom and suffered from pride in his later life as He tried to act as a priest. He finished his reign with leprosy because of his hubris.

Uzziah was also known as Azariah in the earlier histories of the book of Kings. Uzziah means 'God is my strength' while Azariah means 'God is my helper'.

² Hebrews 11:37 "They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword."

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speak of the very hem of His robe. Before Isaiah is commissioned, John 12:41 states that he saw the glory of God. God revealed Himself in His majesty, where even the angelic hosts could only declare the holiness and glory of God throughout the whole earth.

Scholars have debated the tri-fold use of the term “holy, holy, holy” with some of the early church fathers declaring that the angels declared that each member of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) was holy. Ambrose, in *On the Holy Spirit* 3.16.110, said,

“So everything which we esteem holy proclaims that Sole Holiness. Cherubim and Seraphim with unwearied voices praise Him and say: Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God of Sabaoth. They say it, not once, lest you should believe that there is but one; not twice, lest you should exclude the Spirit; they say not holies [in the plural], lest you should imagine that there is plurality, but they repeat thrice and say the same word, that even in a hymn you may understand the distinction of Persons in the Trinity, and the oneness of the Godhead and while they say this they proclaim God.”

Other scholars point towards the Hebraic tendency to use a word twice to create emphasis, for instance, when God calls out to His servants, “Abraham, Abraham”, “Moses, Moses”, and “Samuel, Samuel”. Doubling the word can also become expansive, “שנה, שנה” (every year) or “דר, דר” (each generation). To use a word thrice is the ultimate emphasis and expansion. The Aramaic translation expands precisely so on Isaiah 6:3 by stating that “God is holy in the highest heavens, holy upon the earth, and holy forever—world without end.” Given the greatness of God, surely it is reasonable to believe both are true.

Isaiah responds to his vision in a way that too many of us don't. Knowing God's majesty and glory, he declared his own uncleanness. But Isaiah isn't only humbled in seeing the glory and majesty of God. God restores Isaiah. Isaiah sees his position of lowliness and sinfulness and proclaims his own ruin yet the Lord has mercy. This is when God called for Isaiah to become His messenger to proclaim a hard message to a difficult people.

And the message is difficult but there is hope. God is called the “LORD of hosts” and Isaiah speaks of the seraphim he saw around the throne of God, just a few of the myriad of hosts that do all that God bids them to do. But God sent Isaiah, a man of unclean lips whose guilt was taken away and whose sin was atoned for, to proclaim a message of warning. While so many do not listen to God, there are always those who do. Jesus warned those he taught, “he who has ears to hear, let him hear.” There are always some who will hear and God atones for sin.

Psalm 138. Fear is the natural state of those who hear the voice of God. We see it throughout Scripture, Moses at the burning bush, the Israelites at Mount Sinai, the people hearing the word of God spoken in their midst such as with Ezra and Nehemiah or Josiah. In our other readings today Isaiah, Peter, and Paul all show a form of reverent fear when God appeared to them. But Psalm 138 reintroduces the idea that there would be rejoicing and thanksgiving as well.

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Last week, after the word of God was read in the midst of the people by Ezra and the people were afraid, Nehemiah told them to rejoice. This idea of the holiness of God, as seen in Isaiah 6, connected with singing with joy and thanksgiving, as seen in Psalm 138, is written about in 2nd Temple literature³ and displayed through the lives of His servants.

While God is exalted above all things He still calls down from heaven to man. In the season of Epiphany we remind ourselves that God continuously reveals Himself to us. But Psalm 138 also reminds us that we should call to God. We may go through times of trouble, enemies may surround us, but “on the day I called, You answered me”. God responds to us even as we know that we should respond to God when He calls. God’s presence in our life should cause us to have real gratitude. And as we worship God in thanksgiving, God is also mobilizing us according to His purpose. David starts by personally giving thanks to God but soon all the kings of the earth will join as the steadfast love and faithfulness of God is displayed.

I Corinthians 15:1-11. Jesus told Thomas, “Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen, and have yet believed.” In Corinthians 15, many of Jesus’ disciples (and some of His adversaries) saw Him after His resurrection, but the Corinthians had not. The question was, even with the evidence delivered by those who saw a risen Messiah, would the Corinthians “hold fast to the word” Paul preached to them? Evidently, some of the Corinthians did not.

Hundreds of people saw the resurrected Lord. But it is interesting that Paul only named three, Cephas, James, and himself. All three had previously denied Jesus: Cephas repudiated Jesus during His trial; James, the half-brother of Jesus, seems to have denied that Jesus was the Messiah until the moment that Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection; and Paul directly persecuted Jesus by murdering those who were part of the body of the Messiah. This is the power of the resurrection—salvation and restoration. Without the resurrection (as Paul will declare in the remainder of his argument in I Corinthians 15:12-19) we remain in our sins and are truly to be pitied.

Luke 5:1-11. Very quickly Jesus’ ministry expanded so that crowds would gather to hear Him teach. At this point Luke records Jesus gathering a select group of disciples to follow Him. Just as with Isaiah and, later, Paul, Jesus is going to act in power before calling men to follow and serve Him. But not everyone followed Him, those who were called were willing to act, usually in very real, practical, and physical ways.

Peter, who had first listened to John the Baptist before meeting Jesus, was familiar enough with Jesus and His teaching that he called Him “master” and allowed Jesus to use his equipment despite not yet following Jesus.⁴ While Peter, James, and John were likely tired and

³ In 4Q405, a fragment from the Dead Sea scrolls, a heavenly scene starts with the assemblies of heaven blessing and magnifying the King of all. But they quickly turn to singing with joy and giving thanks.

⁴ Peter meets with Jesus much earlier according to John 1:40-42 but doesn’t follow Jesus until Luke 5:11.

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disappointed after their long, but fruitless, day of work, they were willing to put in a little more effort to assist this great teacher. They are still fishermen at this point but they stopped tending the nets from the night of work and went back out to serve this teacher from Nazareth.

The three men surely listened to Jesus' teaching but it wasn't until afterwards, when Jesus told them to do one more thing for them and they obeyed, that they saw the power of God at work. One of the themes we see from Isaiah, Corinthians, and Luke is that God revealed Himself to sinful men and when He did, they responded.

God has shown Himself to the world through His voice—through creation and the Torah. God has revealed Himself through miracles, redemptive actions, and His incarnation but that doesn't mean that people understand or perceive what they hear and see. Through these passages we consistently see that God calls sinful men who are willing to admit their own shortcomings before their King. They see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and are healed. We understand sin to drive God away but so often in Scripture we also find that God draws near to sinners, even before they repent or turn to Him, in order that they can draw near to Him. But after they repent the relationship changes to something greater. Peter would not only be a fisher of men, He would also walk beside and talk to the creator of the universe while he followed Him.

Hebraic Perspective. Paul reminded the Corinthians that although they hadn't seen the resurrected Messiah, others had. Nonetheless, one of the great hopes of Christians around the world is that one day we will see God as He is.⁵ I have heard so many Christians refer to Jesus' teaching on the servants entrusted with talents as they look to the day that they will enter heaven, "Well done, good and faithful servant."⁶ What a glorious thing to hear as we finally see God for who He is.

But what is the historical result when people see the glory of God? In Isaiah, we see the prophet declare, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts". In Luke, Peter fell down before Jesus and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Fear in the presence of God seems to be the primary response. "Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God"; both Gideon and Manoah were afraid they would die when the angel of the LORD came to them;⁷ Ezekiel, Daniel, and John the Revelator fell down on their faces when they had a vision of the King.

⁵ 1 John 3:2

⁶ Matthew 25:21. Sadly, far fewer Christians wish to live a life as a servant, nevermind that the story ends not with a disciple receiving the reward they desired but the reward they deserved, "cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

⁷ Judges 6:22-23, 13:21-22

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Much of this fear seems to simply be that God is great beyond measure. But there is also an element that we should recognize that we are sinful. Isaiah understood this, Peter understood it, and Paul and James were confronted with it when they encountered Jesus after His resurrection. After God spoke to Job his response was, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

Directly after stating that some will hear "Well done, good and faithful servant." Jesus spoke of the sheep and the goats. The King only invites the blessed to enter the kingdom, the humble servants who did not boast but quietly acted according to the will of their master. Those who thought only of themselves were cast into eternal punishment.

God doesn't leave us in abject fear, hallelujah! But He is the one who lifts us up from having our face bowed to the ground. He is the one who takes away our guilt, our sin, and our shame. And He also rewards those who bow before Him and do His will. Let us bow down before Him. Let us confess our sins. And let us give praise and thanksgiving to God when He draws near to us and calls us to follow Him—as His servants, as His disciples, as His friends, and even as His children.

ACNA Readings

Judges 6:11-24. Judges tells of a time when the people of Israel did whatever was right in their own eyes, something that Deuteronomy 12:8 strictly states they must not do, "You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes." Yet, in the midst of this story Joash seems to have followed the command of God in Deuteronomy 6, "When your son asks you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your son, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand...'"

Joash's son, however, had a problem with the answers he received from his father. His question has been repeated throughout history, "If the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His wonderful deeds?" Gideon's question wasn't answered through philosophy or apologetics, instead God commissioned Gideon and called him to act.

Gideon did act, following the pattern of Abraham, by offering hospitality to a messenger of God. When the angel consumed the food through a touch and through fire, Gideon realized that God's messenger had been talking with him and had commissioned him to fight with Israel's enemies. Gideon's immediate response was fear. This, of course, is the natural response to encountering God.

Unfortunately, the end of the story is very sad for Gideon. It turns out that Joash was not a follower of God nor had He taught His son that the LORD was with them—Joash had turned to

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Baal and Asherah. Having witnessed the wonderful deeds of the LORD, Gideon continued to act in fear. Nonetheless, the LORD continued to work in the midst of Israel through Gideon. God did not wait for the people to fully trust in Him or turn to Him, it was God that drew near to them. But He did not force them to draw near to Him—it wasn't long before Gideon and Israel went back to trusting in foreign Gods who had neither done wondrous deeds for their fathers nor for them.

Psalm 85.⁸ The specific history of Psalm 85 is unclear. It could have been written at almost any point in Israel's history—for people sin and God speaks (sometimes with anger). But God's people, the saints, also listen to God when He speaks while God will hear them and forgive. However, the close connection between the forgiveness of the people and restoration of the land may point towards this being a Psalm after the exile or, like Solomon's prayer at the dedication (II Chronicles 26:24-42), prophetic regarding the possibility of a future exile.

In the Scriptures, Israel is both a people and a land and the two are inextricably linked.⁹ While the whole earth is the Lord's, the opening line references Israel as "your land." Psalm 85:2 then paired the land of Israel with the people of Israel, to whom God had shown forgiveness. The exile was the painful, but promised, consequence of a spiritual falling away from God. Israel had embraced foreign gods and broken His covenant. The consequence, for there are always consequences for every action (sometimes good, sometimes bad), was Assyrian captivity and, later, Babylonian exile for Judah.

This might have tempted the people of Israel to hopelessly abandon the Lord forever. But if not listening to God had caused the exile from the land, not listening to God after the exile would be folly. The psalm sends a message of hope that, for the people of God, salvation is near, and that the Lord will come and dwell in the land.

From verse 8, the psalmist expressed the desire to submit to the Lord. He did this by hearing God speak. Repentance brings a renewed and restored relationship with God, this includes His

⁸ Psalm 85 is attributed to the sons of Korah who, according to the title of the Psalm, prepared worship material for the 'chief musician'. The history of the sons of Korah is an excellent example of redemption, forgiveness and inclusion back into the family of God. Korah was a levite during the wandering in the wilderness whose tasks included the carrying of the Ark of the Covenant when the community moved. Korah joined in the rebellion against Moses, earning the wrath of God, with the earth swallowing the rebels. His descendants did not follow in their fathers rebellious footsteps but returned to faithful service in the Tabernacle (Samuel) and later the Temple as worship leaders.

⁹ A significant part of the identity of the Jewish people is through the ancient connection with the land of Israel. From the beginning, Abraham's call (which included being a blessing to the nations) involved the leaving of one land to go to another land—a land for him and his descendants. The spiritual well-being of the people of Israel is often connected to the health of the land by the prophets and in the prayer life of the Jewish people in the psalms many times as well as in the *Sh'ma* (Deuteronomy 6-11). Jesus also has a connection to the land as part of His Jewish identity as a literal descendent of Abraham.

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presence. The Lord's presence once more in the land would bring further blessings. Loving kindness and truth are paired with righteousness and peace, which poetically meet together with passion, described in the psalm as a kiss. Truth, sometimes translated as faithfulness,¹⁰ even springs from the earth as concurrently righteousness descends from heaven. The psalm concludes with an exhortation for preparation. In this case, it is righteousness that descends from heaven that prepares the way for the Lord. The exhortation to prepare comes from heaven.

¹⁰ Many translations interpret truth (אמת) as faithfulness (אמונה) here. While they have a similar shroesh (root), truth is a better interpretation and is also how the LXX translated it (αληθεια). However, both interpretations convey similar meanings as faithfulness is the action of being true or steadfast.