

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Expectations

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In the weeks between Christmas and Lent, we observe the season of Epiphany, most commonly identified as the time to discover of God's presence on earth.

The scripture readings following Jesus' birth prod us to recognize it's really not God entering our world. These stories given to us in Epiphany awaken us to the reality that our lives have always been bound up in God.

In the coming weeks as we explore Jesus' mysterious identity, we discover more about ourselves and our purpose.

We turn to the first gospel written, the Gospel of Mark. This terse gospel neglects to describe his birth, genealogy, or refer to any divine legacy or conception.

Mark opens with, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ" and then turns immediately to an exodus of people heading from villages in Galilee in search John the Baptist.

"All the people," includes a man called Jesus.

Just as he emerges from the muddy waters, the only indication he might be special comes from the voice that breaks the sky saying, "this is my son, the beloved."

With haste, Jesus gets to work.

*God of mercy, be in my ears that I might hear you.
Be in my eyes that I might see the signs of your grace.
Be in my heart that I might choose to follow you.
Send your spirit among us that in hearing your word,
all these are possible within us. Amen*

Mark 1:14-20

¹⁴ Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

¹⁶ As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishers. ¹⁷ And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” ¹⁸ And immediately they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹ As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets.

²⁰ Immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

Ages ago, when my work turned me into a road warrior with weekly airline travel, I people-watched in airports. Among the mundane travelers like me, my heart broke seeing people,

burdened by illness or the weight of grief, making some desperate pilgrimage. At the other end, I noticed the unmistakable delight of those enthralled in honeymoons or homecomings.

Occasionally, I had the random celebrity sighting.

One time I heard the cadence and commanding wisdom of a familiar voice drifting from the seat behind me. When I turned around, I came eye-to-eye with Ed Bradley. That's a name from the past.

On another flight I sat next to a stunning woman with blond hair. I doubt anyone that beautiful could travel incognito, but by the way she moved, she told us to respect her privacy. When she slid past my knees to get to the restroom, I recognized her as Deborah Norville.

One cloudless night, I settled into an aisle seat next to Neil deGrasse Tyson who claimed the window. Before takeoff, he composed a long note for the pilot, alerting him to the possibility of seeing Haley's Comet. Once in flight, the pilot effused praise about this esteemed astrophysicist to the entire cabin along with his seat number. One by one, it felt as though every single passenger stopped to greet him. He lapped up the attention and held court describing heavenly curiosities on a long transcontinental flight.

You've spotted famous people. The eyes of the Swift-ies among us still light up as they tell stories of how close they sat to Taylor Swift at last summer's concert. Others might catch a glimpse of an athlete out and about, shopping, stopping at the dry cleaner, or picking up a coffee. An athlete's physical prowess and graceful movements draw attention even without a uniform.

We pay premiums to get close to our favorite journalists, musicians, or politicians while they are out on a speaking, concert, or fundraising circuit.

They live with such purpose, parlaying their gifts and talents into a profession and sometimes profits. They become influencers on social media. By definition, influencers seek followers.

We feel a sense of awe around celebrities and can be tongue-tied at those rare moments they engage us.

But, what are the odds an encounter culminates in anything more than a chance to snap a photo, better yet, a selfie, or accumulate enough details to drop their name at the next cocktail party?

Celebrity sighting tends to be one way - if we see them we might get a spark of delight. If they see us, we are as one

among a crowd with no differentiation among the mass of people.

But, we want to be seen.

At the time John the Baptist steps onto the world stage, people were desperate for someone to notice and care. From the few words written in the Gospel of Mark about John, he sees them. He appeals to the marginalized, those choking from the political and religious forces.

We know he sees them because the people pursue him to confess their sins. No one willingly airs their dirty laundry to another unless they feel seen and secure. The people of Galilee who want more from life crave his attention.

Jesus is one among that crowd going to John. At the time, Jesus is not famous. In this gospel, no one suspects anything. Even though the heavens break apart at his baptism with God's voice saying, "this is my son," no one sees or hears.

If they had, wouldn't the authorities arrest him along with John the Baptizer?

This mysterious man, Jesus, steps into the void created at John's arrest.

He preaches, “repent.” In this context the word means more than “clean up your act or turn around.” Jesus calls people to adopt a new perspective on what’s real and possible. Expect more.

He sees Simon and Andrew and James and John. He sees them as fishers and uses language they understand – he calls them to become fishers of people.

Jesus calls more disciples in ways they all feel seen by him.

If he calls carpenters, it is to build. If someone bakes, he will call them to feed. You get the gist.¹ He calls a breadth of common laborers in order to show that being a part of his life does not depend upon virtue or skills or status. He calls without any litmus test to measure merit or preexisting excellence.

The most famous man in the world moves through the world as the antithesis of a celebrity – he cares only about our welfare.

When these men feel seen with the eyes of love, Jesus’ gaze stirs the inherent dignity within them, and all the nonsense falls away. With him, they find their purpose and meaning. They grow more into whom God intended each of them to be.

¹ Words matter. Matt Skinner’s little video unpacks a critical word Jesus speaks. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/videos/epiphany-3b-new-perspectives>.

This story unfolds a bit of the mystery surrounding Jesus and us.

All four disciples live up to Jesus' expectations of becoming people to tell the good news. He leads them to be what God intends as fishers and humans. And all of these men stumble and betray him. At times each is confused. If Jesus sees these men as exemplars, we too can follow.

Secondly, this gospel lets us know that to become a follower takes both a moment and a lifetime. Let that sink in. At one moment his call seems crystal clear and other times too tedious or obtuse or irrelevant.

Lastly, the paradox of accepting his call, is that we do so right where we are. We don't flee from our lives or need to drop what we do. Following him requires only that we change our perspective. If you teach, see each student as uniquely capable. If you are an accountant, interact with people and organizations with an integrity that withstands Jesus' scrutiny.

A CEO tells the story of a time he led a significant lay-off during in the final week of December. He recalls icy temps inside and outside the headquarters.

After they finished the piercing conversations, one-on-one, he brought the executive team to stand outside the main entrance. They endured the cold until the last employee left. He wanted every departing employee to be greeted.

He endured their scrutiny. As he shook as many hands as possible, he told them they mattered.

Jesus sees us for who God created us to be – gifted, fail-able, loveable, and loving. He invites all of us to follow in his ways by giving and caring.

Let me close with another story from my travel days.

At one time, the terminal I used most often at O'Hare in Chicago had a gate tucked away for airline employees and really, frequent travelers...I fell in that category.

Early one morning I struggled to print my boarding pass with my first-class upgrade, evidence that I'd earned this status. In those wee hours, it was just the agent and me. I handed her my boarding pass and ID, lamented, "oh I had such problems printing this."

She paused and looked at me. I finally looked at her.

She was not quite five feet tall, likely a bit older than my mom at the time.

Soft grey curls framed her face. She decorated her uniform with all sorts of lapel pins and insignias. Immediately, I knew she connected to all manner of people. These were likely gifts from those who traveled the world and treasured her presence.

She broke the silence by saying, “Oh my, I’ve seen people with problems.”

In a single look, she convicted me of being that arrogant, snotty person with rights I thought I’d earned. And at the same time, as her eyes lingered in mine with a look of compassion...she released me from that grind and that told me I am no more than a series of transactions or part of a category.

She gave me a gift by seeing me.

She reminded me that I am called to be good in my work, not successful, but good. I needed to imagine and adopt Jesus’ way of selling, managing, recruiting, leading. How would Jesus do my job? I know I failed, often. And I know he offers the grace to start again.

People of God, today we ordain and install officers that you called to lead this congregation. Each one possesses a unique gift for ministry needed right here and now. This church needs project leaders, writers, educators, those with financial acumen, others with a quiet presence for care, and the backbone of integrity.

People of God, know that Jesus sees all of us for who God created us to be. As you lead, listen to his voice. Look with his eyes. He calls each of us in language unmistakable to follow his way of being in the world.



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