



SERMONS THAT WORK

Last Sunday in Epiphany (A)

Look for Jesus

[RCL]: Exodus 24:12-18; Psalm 2 or Psalm 99; 2 Peter 1:16-21; Matthew 17:1-9

Over the course of the liturgical year, we make our way through the Gospel, hearing the accounts of Jesus' ministry from birth, to life, to death, to life eternal.

On the first Sunday of the season after Epiphany, we encounter Jesus at the Jordan River. Matthew tells us, "And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'"

Sound familiar? Today, on the *last* Sunday after Epiphany, we hear a similar proclamation in the Transfiguration story: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased..."

The divine proclamations that bookend the season after Epiphany call our attention to Jesus, God made flesh. Ours is a God who is transcendent, yet immanent; set apart, yet ever drawing near.

Because we encounter Jesus in our lectionary readings from week to week, we are used to him. While that's a good thing, these familiar stories can become predictable. Our God-made-human may begin to seem ordinary, par for the course.

It's natural, given our standard Sunday-to-Sunday routine, to long for an exciting, revelatory encounter with God. Alas, it's not often that God comes to us in sudden bursts of mystifying revelation as he does to Peter, James, and John in this morning's reading. Their miraculous encounter with Jesus is quite different from their everyday experiences with him.

Matthew tells us, "[Jesus'] face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." Moses and Elijah appear with him, a bright cloud overshadows them, and God speaks. One might say that in the midst of the ordinary, these disciples experience the extraordinary.

It must be faith-affirming to experience God in such an amazing way, quite different from our run-of-the-mill encounters with Jesus in the lectionary. Seeing the face of God would certainly solidify one's belief.

Can you imagine? It's not much of a stretch. Some people are so desperate to catch a glimpse of God that they begin to see God all over the place.

Maybe you have heard the stories of people seeing Jesus' face in a tortilla or a piece of toast? Maybe you have heard about a guy who claims to have recognized Christ's countenance on the side of a glass building when the light hits it just right. Or maybe you have personally noticed Jesus staring back at you from the foam swirled on top of your half-caf mochaccino, or, perhaps, from a distant rock formation. Sometimes the people of God are so lost or lonely or out of touch that they will grasp at straws—or even French fries—to catch a glimpse of the incarnate Word.

The desire to glimpse Jesus in unexpected and miraculous ways is understandable. It sure would make believing easier, but we do not *typically* encounter God in the miraculous. Instead, we encounter God in more subtle—yet equally important—ways.

Some folks find God in the woods on a foggy morning. Others see God in the housecat curled up in the sunshine. Some people meet God in their customers, patients, clients, and coworkers. You might even notice God in the cheerful demeanor of a passing stranger.

There may well be those among us who have had a “mountaintop” experience. Thunder crashes, lightning strikes, and God takes shape right before their eyes. But even they, like Peter, James, and John, must eventually walk back down to level ground. Even an extraordinary event can become an ordinary one after someone has a chance to turn it over in their head.

Instead of standing idle and waiting for God to be revealed to us in some extraordinary way, we are called to get up every day and look for Jesus' presence in our ordinary lives. Admittedly, recognizing God at work in ordinary life can be difficult, especially when we face setbacks, sorrow, or general annoyance. But rest assured, God is there.

God is there with the widow whose Social Security check isn't quite enough to keep her in her home of over 50 years. God is there with the night school student who is late to class because her teenager got detention again. God is there with the young mother of four whose youngest refuses to potty-train. And God is even there with you when the cable guy doesn't show up between nine and noon.

All of God's people have bad days; the trick is learning to look for Jesus anyway. That's a habit that truly would be extraordinary! Anybody can recognize Jesus when times are good. Somebody's cancer is cured; they give the credit to God. Somebody meets an old flame and falls in love all over again; they claim that their prayers have been answered. Somebody gets a long-awaited raise; they give God the glory.

Just to be clear: there is absolutely nothing wrong with seeing God in the good; nor should it be our goal to see God exclusively in the bad, but it is necessary for us to look for God in the ordinary because the ordinary is what we have the most of.

Startling revelation is not necessary to convince us of the validity of our faith. Faithfulness does not grow out of God's unanticipated intervention but from a life spent looking for Jesus at all times, and in all the ordinary places.

Our tradition gives us plenty of ways to look for Jesus. A couple of daily doses of prayer should do the trick. Reading the Bible helps. Saying "I love you" is a good start. Talking to God out loud is also a healthy thing to do, especially when you're angry.

Coming to worship is also important, not for the sake of average Sunday attendance, but for the sake of your relationship with God, a relationship fueled by hearing God's word and participating in the rituals of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

The task is simple. Look for Jesus. When you finally do catch a glimpse of him, your perspective will change in an instant. He may not always appear in the way you want him to, or in the way you think he should, but nevertheless, he will be there.

So, watch for him. And listen, too. You'll know it when you hear it—that voice from heaven that rings in your ear, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased."

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