



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 5 (B)

Revealed

[RCL] Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-12,21c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Some Sundays, the lectionary readings seem to fit together better than other Sundays. Some Sundays, a coherent theme practically jumps from scriptures' pages into our laps. On others, searching for it seems to require a magnifying glass and a fine-toothed comb. Perhaps what is more widely true Sunday in, Sunday out is this: a theme that one person finds sitting in their lap, another hearer may not recognize at all.

The overarching theme of this season after the Epiphany is God's manifestation in Jesus Christ. After celebrating the birth of the baby in the manger, we now experience the Word made flesh all grown up and living out his ministry. Sunday mornings during this season are filled with stories of Jesus being revealed to the people around him, whether it be through his baptism, his miracles, his calling of the disciples, or his teaching in the synagogues.

While we Christians understand Jesus to be the ultimate revelation of God, we also know that God didn't wait until Jesus was born to be revealed to humankind. In fact, God revealed Godself all the way back in the first chapter of Genesis when the heavens and the earth, and all of humankind, were created in the divine image.

Each of today's readings—from the Old Testament and the New—reveal something about that divine image; that is, something of who God is—before, during, and after Jesus' earthly life.

Both Isaiah 40 and Psalm 147 reveal God's greatness in a time before Jesus. The prophet Isaiah delivers God's word to the people of Israel in exile. With vivid images, Isaiah reveals to the Israelites once again that their God is a God who is bigger and more powerful than even their enemies. "It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing."

Likewise, the psalmist's words reveal a God who can at once comfort a chosen people and tally the stars in the sky. "The Lord . . . gathers the exiles of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. He counts the number of the stars and calls them all by their names."

But these two Old Testament passages do not merely reveal something about who God is; they also show us that God's word embodies different points of view.

The prophet Isaiah's words are . . . well, prophecy. They are God's words, spoken through a mortal voice. Through the mouth of Isaiah, God is revealed to the Israelites in a steadfast promise to strengthen the weak. "Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

The psalm, on the other hand, is a song of praise that comes not from the mouth of God or God's prophet, but from a faithful follower of God. This is not the voice of the One who makes the promises; it is the response of one who has experienced them. "The Lord lifts up the lowly, but casts the wicked to the ground . . . He covers the heavens with clouds and prepares rain for the earth; He makes grass to grow upon the mountains and green plants to serve mankind. . . the Lord has pleasure in those who fear him, in those who await his gracious favor."

The differing perspectives in these two Old Testament passages are not unlike those in that famous New Testament exchange heard each year in the days leading up to Christmas. God's heavenly messenger Gabriel reveals God's plan when he comes and says, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus."

Mary's most profound response to this revelation comes a little while later when she sings, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." To this day, Mary's words reveal a God who casts down the mighty and lifts up the lowly; who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty; who helps the chosen ones and never breaks a promise. Both Gabriel and Mary reveal something about who God is. One heralds God's promise from heaven. The other responds to the experience of that promise on earth.

When Jesus arrives, these heavenly and earthly perspectives are joined in the flesh. In Mark's first chapter, Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law at home, and with news of his miracles spreading quickly, the whole city gathers at the door to catch a glimpse as Jesus cures the sick and demon-possessed. These folks are among the first to witness God revealed where heaven and earth meet—in the person of Jesus Christ.

The next morning, after retreating for a time of prayer, Jesus sets off for the neighboring towns to continue preaching and healing. "For that is what I came out to do," he says. And so, the marvelous ministry begins. More and more will soon come to know God manifest in human form. They will hear his teachings and witness his acts of compassion. Some of them will even walk with him all the way to the cross. Three days later, the first few will begin to understand that what seemed like the end was really just another beginning. God would continue to be revealed.

Several years following Jesus' resurrection, St. Paul writes to the Corinthians about what his experiences of God's revelation in Jesus have taught him. He reveals to the faithful a God who calls each of us to be a servant to everyone—even to those of cultures different from our own. Like Paul, we who live the post-resurrection life preach the Good News not simply for our own benefit, but for the benefit of those who will hear it anew.

We may not have first-hand experience of the person of Jesus, but our lives are changed because the Word became flesh. That means that today's Good News is no different than it is on any other Sunday (or any other day of the week for that matter!): God is revealed to us. God has always been revealed to us.

As one of our Eucharistic prayers puts it, we thank God “for the goodness and love which you have made known to us in creation; in the calling of Israel to be your people; in your Word spoken through the prophets; and above all in the Word made flesh, Jesus, your Son.”

The “above all” part of that can be tricky for some folks. It is certainly not meant to suggest that the God revealed to us in Jesus is different or more authentic than the God of the prophets and psalmists. God is God, living and true. The words “above all” simply acknowledge that as Christians we experience Jesus as the perfect embodiment of God's solidarity with humanity. He who by his death conquered death has raised us to everlasting life. Because we live in this reality, we do our best to follow the example God has revealed to us since before time began.

So, week in, week out, we may experience God in different ways, from different perspectives. And from season to season the themes of our common worship may change. But the sure thing is, we will experience God. And when we do, we are called to respond in much the same way: by sharing God's Word with the world.

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