

Pronouns She/Her/Hers

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Texts:

Will you please pray with me? God be with us. May we find the wisdom we need, may we hear the needs of those we meet, and may we love the life that we are given. May the words of my mouth and the mediations of all our hearts be pleasing to you, oh God, our rock and our redeemer, Amen.

Lately, I've had a lot of conversations about how it is unbelievable that after all these weeks we are still in the month of January- that January somehow is magically longer than all other months of the year. While I am open to exploring the possibility that our calendars have been lying to us in this new year of 2020, I think there might be something else going on here. January is the month that comes after the rush of Christmastide and the intensity of the Advent season; it comes after the holiday parties and the familiar stories of Jesus' birth. The New Year comes, resolutions are set, and the season of Epiphany begins. In addition to the reset of going back to normal routines it might be that our disengagement with the weight of what Epiphany means to us might be contributing to the slowdown of time. My experience has been that sometimes in the mainline Protestant church we aren't quite sure what to do with the themes of Epiphany. When we hear the words testify, witness, and revelation we tend to get a little bit uncomfortable. As a result, this essential season sometimes falls into this role of a time of

in-between, of transition between the joy of Christmas and the sacred seriousness of Lent.

Epiphany means manifestation, revelation, or a sudden and profound understanding of something. In our own tradition this word signifies the moment Jesus is shown to be an embodiment of God in the world—an event so miraculous, so incredible that we are still wrestling with what it means for our lives, an event that starts our journey towards an intimate relationship with God and one another. So, what’s so uncomfortable about that? In some respects, everything-- if we acknowledge our human tendency to be afraid of intimacy no matter how much we long for it. Paying attention to this event, talking about it, reveals to the world what is precious to us, what kind of story and what kind of God we ultimately belong to. Something about speaking it out loud makes it more real and with its realness comes emotional, spiritual, and relational risks for us. It bestows a responsibility on us as people who put Jesus at the center of our faith to claim that we belong to Christ, as Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians. It also opens the door to fully embracing a faith that will change our lives.

This discomfort in talking directly about Jesus was clear to me in the preface to a prayer book that I have recently added to my collection. The prayers were written by the leader of the Corrymeela Community, Northern Ireland’s oldest peace and reconciliation center and a thriving place of worship. Their testimony for Christ heals divisions among groups with diverse cultures and beliefs instead of furthering their fracture. They

gracefully claim the truth in Christ without claiming it to be the only truth as they work towards reconciliation among people of faith. The author shares with the reader a story, which I will share with you now: “A few years ago, at Mass, I was sitting near a woman who had a small boy on her lap. He looked to be about three years old. It was an ordinary Sunday mass and the child seemed like an ordinary child. At the time of consecration, the faithful were quiet, the bell was rung, the priest held up the sacrament and everything was as expected. Then the child, who had, up to now, been quiet, shouted out: “Hello Jesus!” He dragged out the hello into one long yodel. Everybody in the church turned. Like many children, he knew an audience when he had one, so he lauded out the louder: “Hellooo Jesus!” The author continues on, “It was a moment of delight. The priest looked shocked, blank, as if Jesus had turned up, in the actual flesh and bone. Shut the child up, you could hear in the fear. I cannot remember anything else from that mass apart from the warm welcome of a small child who took the story seriously; the small child whose words of welcome were the surprise of praise among the predictable.

I’m guessing he’d been told to say hello to Jesus around the time the bell tolls. He hadn’t yet learnt the difference between inner voice and outer voice. So, he greeted: loudly, warmly, with a welcome as wide and magnificent as the world. It can be a shock to take Jesus of Nazareth seriously.”

It can be a shock to take Jesus of Nazareth seriously; it can be out of the social norm to speak Jesus back into the air with abandon, to desire to seek to be in the very

presence of God-and yet this is what Epiphany requires of us. Admitting that we need something, that we seek something that is at the same time a mystery to us is an uncomfortable thing to do especially in a culture that puts a high value on knowledge, arguments of reason, and a perception of control over our own lives.

Our scripture readings this morning are both inviting us to consider what this Jesus person is all about. Our passage from the Gospel of John is divided into two main narratives. The first describes the testimony of John the Baptist that Jesus is God's chosen one. The second contains Jesus' first words to his future disciples as they attempt to follow him, trusting John's testimony as to his identity.

This second portion of the narrative is quite a strange scene. John points to Jesus and exclaims to his students that Jesus is the one they are looking for. His students then without any question start trailing Jesus on the road he is walking on without introducing themselves, or even saying a word to him. How would you feel if two strangers started following you down road on your way home? In some ways, it might remind us of a scene from the British Comedy troupe Monty Python because it seems so out of the social norm to just be following someone like that. However unusual, they are on a fact-finding mission about Jesus and perhaps they don't want him to know, or so it seems to us. Perhaps, we can identify with that feeling when reflecting on our own faith journeys. I certainly can.

In the end, they can't get away with remaining anonymous. They couldn't follow him without being known, without Jesus sensing that they were there for something. Jesus pays attention to their presence and he asks them a question that we are all longing to hear: "What are you looking for?" Their need for something more is recognized and instead of giving an answer they ask him another question, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" or following the Greek more closely, "Rabbi, where are you abiding or remaining?" Jesus' response is in the form of an invitation. Like a good Rabbi he listens to the need behind their question, he knows they are not looking for his address, but that they have a desire to be in his presence, that their hope is to be able to see God in their lives. He invites them to "Come and see." Without any requirement, or judgment, or evaluation he provides for their deepest need to be close to the light of Christ in what is often a dark world.

It is with this exchange of questions that Jesus establishes relationship with the two men who were previously strangers. This narrative is often characterized as the moment when Jesus called his first disciples. How did he call them? He invited them into relationship with him by recognizing their presence, he made it clear that he saw who they were and that they were in search of something, that they were grasping for the one who would bring them out of the exiled corners of their lives.

This question that sparked this life-giving relationship "What are you seeking?" is something that we should all be asking ourselves as members of a community of faith. As

we prepare to attend our annual meeting after worship, First Church- let's ask ourselves: what are we looking for? Why do we walk through the sanctuary door every week? Where does God's light abide in our lives? What are we afraid of?

I can imagine that there was some element of fear and excitement in the hearts of Simon Peter and Andrew as they ran after Jesus on the day that everything changed for them. The fear and excitement are understandable because the closer we are to being in the presence of God's light and the deeper we commit to pointing to God in the world, the closer we are to being truly seen and known through connection and relationship. That day Jesus showed them how to enter relationship with him, but to do so required that they admitted to what their deepest needs were. By paying attention to them Jesus invited them to have courage to spend time face to face with the light of Christ, to be rescued from exile, and to see that they too are beloved.

To claim and express our deepest needs in relationship exposes our vulnerability and our rough edges, but also opens the possibility to be served and to be fully known and accepted by one another and by God. The prayer book from Northern Ireland that I mentioned earlier gives some background on the origin of the name of the peace and reconciliation community, Corrymeela. When the center was originally founded, they thought the word "Corrymeela" meant "Hill of Harmony," but later they found out that the word means "Lumpy Crossing Place," which is less than elegant sounding. The author goes on to say that he appreciates the inclusion of the word lumpy because "places

of need are full of stones. We stumble, but then we can make shelters and art from the rocks that we stumble over.” Paul says in his letter to the church at Corinth, “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”

Jesus didn’t expect his future disciples to be particularly eloquent or expect that their attempts to tell others that God was right there in front of them were grounded in worldly wisdom. What he did expect was for them to be honest about what their hearts needed to be fully alive and to accept his invitation into deeper relationship with him.

In this short interaction between Jesus, Simon Peter, and Andrew there are five different Greek words that mean “seeing” in the text, which shows us the importance of seeing God in the message of Epiphany. So, the question remains, where are we called to see God in our own lives? Where can we come and see what is holy?

Saint Hildegard of Bingen, an abbess, artist, mystic, and theologian in the 11th century saw visions from God since the age of three. As one historian said, “her visions caused her to see humans as “living sparks” of God’s love, coming from God as daylight comes from the sun.” We can and should see the holy in our connections to one another. So much of this world that we live in can make us feel invisible or as if our pain has the power to swallow us whole. In this season, we are reminded that God invites us to see Christ in our every day, to see the light of God within each other, to seek the presence of the holy and precious in the world and to tell our friends about it too.

This past semester I took a course focused on the Zen Peacemakers movement founded by Bernie Glassman, a group that is committed to social justice engagement informed by Buddhist practice.

Bernie Glassman's book titled, *Bearing Witness* narrates his experience living with the un-housed on the streets of New York City. During his time there he frequented a shelter and meal program called the Bowery Mission. He speaks about the power of letting go of assumptions, of reaching out for relationship, and about having the courage to talk about the things that really matter in this life. Even in the depths of darkness he testifies that through having the courage to see Christ and the Buddha in everything and everyone, "love came back to us from ruined barracks that before we couldn't bear to enter." My sincerest hope is that we all can find strength and courage from the light of Christ in the world, that we can draw hope from the flame that feeds our connection to others, the light of Christ that we can touch and see and delight in.

As the postlude of one of my favorite books titled *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* says, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God. We make this affirmation in concert with countless witnesses who affirm the same. For us, there is nothing new in this affirmation, except the newness of coming to know its truth in our own lives—not as a message passed on to us, but as a living discovery. With (our fellow servant of God,) Job, we witness to a living truth: For I know that my Redeemer lives...then in my flesh I shall see God (Job Ch 19:25-26)."

May our imperfect and lumpy wrestling with Jesus as an embodiment of God give us strength to heal the ruined barracks of our hearts, to admit to what deep need they long for, to believe in our capacity for healing, and to know that we are fully seen and invited into the presence of God as her beloved children. Our Redeemer lives, indeed.

To end our time together, please join me in a prayer from the Corrymeela Community:

Jesus of Nazareth,
Strangers came to you
Because, with you,
They hoped that they'd be seen
For who they were
Not for who the seers saw.
May we who are strangers see each other,
Because we, like you,
Need to be seen to be believed.
Amen



