

Sermon prep for January 20 Epiphany II – Michael Oxley

Readings:

Psalm 40: 1 – 12

Isaiah 49:1 – 7

I Cor 1:1 – 9

John 1:29 – 42

The next day he [John the Baptizer] sees Jesus coming toward him and says, "Look, the Lamb of God, the one taking away the sins of the world. This one is he about whom I said, 'A man comes after me who has come into being before me, because he was first,' and I didn't know him, but I came baptizing in water so that he might be revealed to Israel through this." And John witnessed saying, "I have seen the spirit descending as a dove from heaven and it remained upon him. And I didn't know him, but the one sending me to baptize in water, that one said to me, 'The one on whom you might see the spirit descend and remain upon him, this is the one baptizing with holy spirit.' And I have seen and witnessed that this one is God's son."

On the next day John again stood there, and two of his disciples, and having seen Jesus walking around he says, "Look, the Lamb of God." And having heard [him] speaking his two disciples followed Jesus.

Now Jesus, turning around and seeing them following, says to them, "What do you seek?"

And they said to him, "Rabbi (which is translated 'teacher'), where are you staying?"

He says to them, "Come and see."

So they went and saw where he is staying and they stayed with him that day; it was about four in the afternoon. Andrew, Simon the Rock's brother, was one of the two listening to John and following him; this one first finds his brother (the same Simon) and says to him, "We've found the Messiah!" (This is translated "Anointed One.")

He led him to Jesus. Jesus, seeing him, said, "You are Simon John's son, you will be called Kepha." (This means "Rock.")

Content thoughts:

- Epiphanies (Greek: $\epsilon\pi\iota\phi\alpha\alpha\iota\omega$ to appear, to give light, to be revealed) are happening on several levels and between several people:
 - John has his epiphany about Jesus as anointed with the Spirit of God
 - John reveals Jesus as the sacrificial lamb of God to Andrew and another
 - Andrew reveals Jesus as the Anointed One to Peter

- Peter is revealed to himself, by Jesus, as Rock
- This is like a game of Telephone. (Here's your lead!)

Burning questions:

- What are we waiting for? What are we expecting to have revealed? What are our expectations of God?
- Why do we so often get it wrong? What drives or influences or mistakes? How can we get the message clearly and without obstruction?
- How does God reveal God's "plan" for the world, and for us? Are we listening?

Logic:

Gaps in logic and "Between the lines":

- What does 'A man comes after me who has come into being before me, because he was first,' mean?
- Is John handing the two disciples off to Jesus? He makes a point of pointing out Jesus twice, names him "the one who's taking away the sins of the world," "God's Son," "Lamb of God," as if saying, "Wake up, guys! There he is!"
- The exchange between the two disciples of John and Jesus is a bit strange. He asks them what they seek, and they ask him where he is staying. What's that all about? Why don't the disciples get to the point?
- How does Jesus know who Peter is, and why does he name him "Rock"?
- Here's the Telephone game:
 - John's says Jesus is "Lamb of God," "the one who's taking away the sins of the world," and "God's Son."
 - Andrew calls Jesus, "Rabbi."
 - Andrew also somehow hears John as calling Jesus, "Messiah," which is how he names Jesus to Simon.
 - Simon, expecting Messiah, instead finds this newly baptized Galilean carpenter and itinerant preacher who, rather than revealing his name and role, instead gives Simon a new name – Rock.

Theological context:

- Relationship to process theology: God works out the best direction for the universe, and us collectively and individually, and lets us know this direction moment to moment

Let me warn you: my sermon today is one of questions, not answers.

Just a warning.

Have you ever played the game "Telephone"? You know the one...you sit in a circle, one person thinks of a message, whispers it to the next person, who whispers it to the next, and so on. When the message has been passed around the entire circle, the first person reveals it and the original message, to the amusement (and maybe dismay) of everyone. It's always an interesting exercise in listening, how we filter what we hear, how we interpret what we hear. I've played the game and the message has returned to the speaker intact; I've played the game and the message has returned in an apparently different language. The games when the output is very different from the input are always the most interesting to me. I always wonder how the message becomes transmuted into its final form.

Sometimes in relationships, across generations, cultures, languages, our messages get changed. They become messages we did not intend. This can be a matter of dismay, of humor or of curiosity. How many times have we said, "That's not what I said. What I said was..." The fact of the matter is, often we hear what we want to hear (I'm certainly guilty of this, probably more than I should admit), or we say what we think the listener wants to hear. How and what we hear is indeed colored by many things: language, culture, background, memory, history, desire for a certain outcome.

And so we mis-hear, transmute, misinterpret. This has consequences, usually not the best, for us. Listening without filtering through the fine mesh of our egos, personal histories, and prejudices, as well as the needs and desires of ourselves and others is a difficult proposition. And when the initial message is confusing to begin with, this makes the task of listening even more challenging.

Listen again to these passages from today's Gospel, from a rather interesting game of Telephone. (I'll warn you: this is my translation, so I may be writing what I wanted to hear from the original Greek.)

[John the Baptizer] sees Jesus coming toward him and says, "Look, the Lamb of God, the one taking away the sins of the world. This one is he about whom I said, 'A man comes after me who has come into being before me, because he was first,' and I didn't know him, but I came baptizing in water so that he might be revealed to Israel through this."...On the next day John again stood there, and

two of his disciples, and having seen Jesus walking around he says, "Look, the Lamb of God." And having heard [him] speaking, his two disciples followed Jesus.

Now Jesus, turning around and seeing them following, says to them, "What do you seek?"

And they said to him, "Rabbi (which is translated 'teacher'), where are you staying?"

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Andrew...finds his brother [Simon] and says to him, "We've found the Messiah!" (This is translated "Anointed One.")

He led him to Jesus. Jesus, seeing him, said, "You are Simon John's son, you will be called Kepha." (This means "Rock.")

John and his disciples find themselves in a challenging place of listening. John has recently been the recipient of a revelation. A message that "one who baptizes with holy spirit" will be revealed in a very specific way. That person has revealed himself to John, and that "epiphany" gets transmuted. Perhaps the power of the vision, the suddenness of Jesus' appearance, maybe he ate a bad locust. But by this time, John is pointing out "one who baptizes with holy spirit" as "the Lamb of God who's taking away the sins of the world." Now, I'm sure this was important to John; after all, he's busy baptizing for the forgiveness of sins. But he refers to Jesus as what the Jews in the Temple would call a sin-offering, a live animal for sacrifice as atonement for sin.

This must be rather confusing to those listening. Human sacrifice is forbidden! And then John adds an almost Zen-like statement that this Lamb of God is one who "comes after me who has come into being before me, because he was first."

What? Anyway, so John's disciples are, I'm guessing, around when he makes these cryptic utterances, and I would imagine they're appropriately bewildered. So John has to repeat himself the next day, almost as if he's encouraging the disciples to jump ship and join the newcomer. Andrew and another disciple, "having heard him speaking," but getting the message in a somewhat garbled way, decides John wants them to learn something from the "Lamb," so he and his companion give chase. Jesus, sensing he's being followed, asks the two their purpose in following him. They grant him a new title, Teacher – probably given to him as a term of respect since John seems to think he's important – and spend the rest of the day with him, when invited by Jesus.

Apparently excited about what they've seen and heard, Andrew reports to his brother Simon. It's not clear if Simon is also a disciple of John, but Andrew feels

his experience with the Rabbi is important enough to tell Peter, not only that Jesus is a teacher of no mean skill, but that he is also “the Anointed,” the person who foretold to lead the Jews in forcing the Roman Empire out of Jerusalem and who will restore the kingdom of David and Solomon.

Peter, comes out to meet the Messiah, perhaps expecting glory and trumpets. Instead he finds a young teacher, who has just been washed clean of his sin, who, rather than displaying the signs of his inevitable triumph over the Romans, decides instead that Peter needs a name change.

It’s all very confusing. From “Lamb of God” to “Rabbi” and to “Messiah” – quite a journey for this epiphany.

We, too, filter our knowledge and experience of Epiphany and epiphanies, and get very different messages. We must ask ourselves: What are we waiting for? What are we expecting to have revealed? How does God reveal God’s “plan” for the world, and for us? How can we receive God’s epiphany clearly and without obstruction? Are we listening at all?

We want God to do certain things for us, to be certain ways for us. We want God to be for us...our way. We forget that God comes to us in unexpected ways, not as we want. God reveals Godself to us, in this child, in the young rabbi of today’s Gospel. God doesn’t force us to do things, but shows us the way, calls us by our true names, and asks us to follow God. And God calls us to be ourselves right now, in every moment, not who we want to be after we leave this existence. We need to listen for God’s call to us, to hear God’s true name for us, God’s aim for our lives, our actions, our world.

God speaks to us, calls to us, moment by moment, to be who we are, to make the choices, to take the actions, that further move us toward making the world the place it has the potential to be. In every moment, we can practice listening for God’s aim for us, for this world. And we can also practice putting that aim into action. Sometimes the aims of others for us will send us off track. Sometimes our less-than-best desires will intervene. Sometimes...we just won’t pay attention.

But here’s the cool thing: Even if we don’t take exactly the action that would best further beauty, harmony and good in the world – God’s purposes – God is watching and listening us, too, reviewing and adjusting God’s vision for what the best, the most beautiful and harmonious world would be. And we get a chance,

every moment, to hear that again and make a new choice regarding aligning ourselves with that divine aim!

Yes, God is revealed to us in this season as a human infant, enters the lives of the people of his time and our Gospel today as an itinerant teacher and healer. We will often insist on making God into our image. But we are called to listen to, to allow ourselves to have ourselves revealed to us by God.

Are we listening?