

# SERMON STARTERS

James L. Killen, Jr.

**December 30, 2001**  
**1st Sunday after Christmas Day**  
Isa. 63:7-9; Ps. 148;  
Heb. 2:10-18; Matt. 2:13-23

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If we gaze long enough at the sometimes bewildering book of Hebrews, a story emerges, like the images that emerge from those “magic eye” abstractions. It is a story about God reaching out through Jesus to engage us and to lead us to life. God sent One who is an aspect of God’s own being to be one of us, to identify with us, like a big brother. Like us, he experienced oppression, (Mt. 2:13-23), temptation, (Heb. 4:15) and mortality, (Heb. 2:14-15).

Under our circumstances, he lived the life of obedience to God’s loving purpose for which we were all created. He broke the power of oppression, temptation, and death. His sacrifice set us free from the guilt of our disobedience. His life demonstrated the possibility of the life of obedience to God’s loving purpose. Now the one who became one with us has gone back to being an aspect of God’s being. We can live unafraid, knowing that there is One there where God is who knows us, understands us, loves us, believes in us, and wants us to live as he lived.

Like a good coach, Jesus came and joined our team, taught us how to run the obstacle course before us, ran it himself to show us that it can be done,



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and now stands at the finish line cheering us on. Let us follow the leader. (Heb. 12:1-2)

**January 6, 2002**  
**Epiphany of our Lord**  
Isa. 60:1-6; Ps. 72:1-7, 10-14;  
Eph. 3:1-12; Matt. 2:1-12

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Like Isaiah, we have shared a vision of a time when all peoples will come to worship the Lord and to live in God’s light. Surely then, all people will live together in peace. But now, long after Jesus came, the world is still torn by hatred and violent conflict. Some of the conflict is between religious groups. Some tell us that our hope that “Jesus shall reign” is “triumphalism” and that it contributes to the conflict.

Could we have misunderstood? Perhaps we need a new kind of triumphalism. Surely, all Christians should want to share their Christian faith. But would Jesus not want us first to live, teach, and serve the joyful commitment of life to life that is the way of love?

We have to start with ourselves, learning to live not just out of a professed religion, but out of a costly commitment to love. We would have to learn to practice the difficult strategies of love amidst the violence and ambiguity of life in our world. And we would have to learn how to enable others to live in love. Perhaps then, “Peace will abound...” (Ps.72:7) and Jesus will indeed reign.

**January 13, 2002**  
**1st Sunday after Epiphany**  
Isa. 42:1-9; Ps. 29;  
Acts 10:34-43; Matt. 3:13-17

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Who is the servant of God about whom Isaiah speaks? Is it better to think not of a person or a nation, but of a role?

Whoever will be so completely committed to the purpose of God that God can work through him or her to accomplish that purpose is the servant of God. It is God’s purpose to bring forth the compassionate justice upon which the wholeness of the universe depends. (See Paul D. Hanson, on Isaiah 40-66 in *Interpretation*, pp. 40-48.) At his baptism, Jesus stepped into that role. He was born for it. But he also made a free human decision to commit himself to it. He committed himself to do the loving work of God in the loving way that God does it. At the very same time, he identified himself with sinful humanity. God affirmed Jesus as his servant and son and sent his spirit to him. Jesus spent his life doing the loving work of God and calling others to follow him in being servants of God.

If that is what the baptism of Jesus meant, shouldn’t ours mean that too? Shouldn’t our baptism mean more than just that we have accepted personal salvation? Shouldn’t it also represent our commitment and our ordination to join Jesus in working to bring about compassionate justice in the world?

**January 20, 2002**  
**Second Sunday after Epiphany**  
Isa. 49:1-7; Ps. 40:1-11;  
1 Cor. 1:1-9; Jn. 1:29-42

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John’s gospel has a way of hiding deep meanings in simple statements. “Come and see” is an invitation to live daily in a life shaping relationship with God and to discover the difference it can make. Jesus first addressed this invitation to some who were following him at a distance because John the Baptist had pointed him out and said, “Here is the Lamb of God...” Jesus responded, not to the question they actually asked but to the one he knew they wanted to ask. “Are you the one we have been hoping for?” “What do you have to offer?”

These questions cannot be answered with words alone. They must be answered with experiences and discoveries that come only to those who have taken at least some adventure into faith and commitment. Jesus said, "Come." Leave where you are in life. Venture out. Be open to something new. Dare to trust and to follow.

"Come and see." What Christ has to offer has to be seen from the inside. Then, commitment and faith can increase. So can discovery. When we experience new life in Christ, we will participate in showing forth God. Like John, we will point to Jesus and say, "There is the one you have been looking for." When others show an interest, we will say, like Philip, "Come and see." (John 1:46)

**January 27, 2002**  
**Third Sunday after Epiphany**

Isa. 9:1-4; Ps. 27:1, 4-9;  
1 Cor. 1:18-31; Matt. 4:12-23

It is interesting to see what happens when people are involved for the first time in serious, long-term Bible study. When they finally begin to hear what the Bible is saying, their first honest reaction is likely to be, "Hey, that doesn't make sense!" They have always thought that the Christian faith would be supportive of the values of their culture. Then they discover that it is not. That is an important discovery. For different reasons, both the Jews and the Greeks who first heard the message of the cross responded, "Hey, that doesn't make sense!" Similarly, in our culture, that is intellectual skeptical, emotionally cynical, morally jaded, and economically "bottom line" oriented, the idea that there is a God and that God loves us enough to suffer for us seems unbelievable. And in our self-defensive and self-seeking culture, the idea that we should "take up the cross" and live in self giving love seems both foolish and dangerous.

But if we dare to believe that what the Bible is telling us is true, it will show us what is wrong with our world and with our lives, what is the real source of our troubles, what needs fixing. And it will lead the believers into an exciting new way of life that is life at its best.

**February 2, 2002**  
**4th Sunday after Epiphany**

Mic. 6:1-8; Psalm 15;  
1 Cor. 1:18-31; Matt. 5:1-12

What does the Lord require of us? What will it take to make things right?

Micah warned of the threat of an Assyrian invasion. What threatens us? The disintegration of our families? The moral decline of our culture? The realization that our lives are meaningless? Or is there some big personal problem or disappointment that threatens us? What will it take to fix that? Can we bribe God to change things by going through some religious ritual, by repeating some carefully prescribed little prayer, by giving money, or maybe by putting prayer back into public schools? No, those things in themselves will not make the needed difference.

What does the Lord require of us? A changed life. A life made different from the inside out by the love of God working within us, a life in which we do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God because those are the things that come naturally, the things we want to do. Those things can make a difference, not by bribery or by magic, but by the effective impact of that kind of living in our lives and in our world.

And here is the great surprise. God does not require the impossible or the burdensome. God makes possible what God requires. And those who enter into that possibility experience true blessedness, real happiness.

**February 10, 2002**  
**Transfiguration Sunday**

Ex. 24:12-18; Ps. 99;  
2 Pet. 1:16-21; Matt. 17:1-9

Jesus has been part of the furniture of most of our lives for as long as we can remember. We know some of his story. We remember some of the things he said. But most of us have never really taken him seriously.

Were the disciples beginning to take Jesus for granted too? Had they ever really gotten the picture? Had they



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been so sure they knew what he was saying that they had quit listening? If that was happening, the transfiguration changed it. Those who were there got the picture. They reorganized everything around a new center in Jesus and started listening again. That kind of thing can happen to people like us too. Lots of people have been surprised to discover that the thing they needed most to make their lives work was something they had known about since they were children.

What kind of experience would it take to get our attention? Maybe one in which life shows us that Jesus was right about materialism not leading to happiness or about love being the only hope of our world. Maybe some great experience of God's love reaching out would do it. However it happens, discovering who Jesus really is can give a new dimension, a new center, to life and open a new possibility.

Is it time to take another look at Jesus? ☐

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