



SECOND SUNDAY AFTER

EPIPHANY WORSHIP

Patricia Farris

Worship on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany offers diverse and rich possibilities for what Gail O'Day calls "noticing and responding to the appearances of God in our midst." Whether the worship style of a particular community is high church or informal, traditional or seeker, family-oriented or sacramental, a variety of themes of call and response can be identified and developed. I invite you and your worship planning team to begin planning early, prayerfully considering which of these many themes might be most needed and fruitful for your congregation in this season. As a worship team, work and pray together to help one another hear and discern the voice of God calling in your time, your place and your community.

"Here I Am, Lord. Is It I, Lord?" (UMH 593) While this day's theme of call and response can take the church in a great variety of directions, its central message revolves around each disciple hearing God's call. Each worshipper should leave this service yearning to hear God's call anew in and for their own life. This call is initiated in our baptism. Congregational renewal of baptismal vows should be considered for this Sunday, if not celebrated the week prior on the Baptism of the Lord. *The United Methodist Book of Worship* and the General Board of Discipleship website www.gbod.org offer many fruitful suggestions for introducing this rich practice to the congregation. The denominational study on baptism, "Water-washed and Spirit Born" is an excellent guide for congregational study and reflection. Worship leaders, ushers and Stephen ministers should be prepared for the outpouring of emotions which sometimes come in this service—tears, sharing of memories, regrets, renewed commitment to service.

"I will come to you in silence. . ." (TFWS 2218) The sermon, liturgy and music might focus around teaching and encouraging

disciples ways to "notice" the appearance or voice of God. The cry of the psalmist for God to "search me and know my ways" leads into a sermon theme of "teach us how to pray," a common plea from Christians new and old. Centering prayer, *lectio divina* (prayerful reading of the Scripture) and other spiritual practices might be described and offered as paths to personal discernment.

"I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together."

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(UMH 558) As Dr. O'Day points out, both the call to Samuel and the call of Jesus' first disciples are texts of "communal epiphany." Individuals learn to hear and recognize the voice of God calling through the community of faith. Starting from the premise that all Christians are called into ministry in our baptism, the day's worship might celebrate that gift and invite the congregation into mutual exploration of their gifts for ministry. This theme dovetails with the work

of the congregation's Committee on Lay Leadership. The Lay Leader or other committee members might offer perspectives on their work, or introduce an emphasis on spiritual gifts.

Alternatively, the call to ordained ministry might be lifted up. Some congregations have proud histories of identifying and encouraging men and women for vocations in ordained ministry, but far too many fail to take seriously their responsibility to nurture and support future ordained leadership for the church. The Pastor-Parish or Staff-Parish Relations Committee might assist in planning and leading the service, interpreting their role in the life of the congregation and encouraging members to seriously consider God's call for their lives.

"Hush, hush, somebody's calling my name" (*Songs of Zion*, 100). Falling the day before the national Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday, worship on this Sunday might center around Dr. King's ministry, current local or national issues related to race, econom-

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ics, or war and peace. The service could involve children and youth in pondering Dr. King's message for their lives and discipleship. The sermon can explore Dr. King's call as coming from a community of the church, family, civil rights leaders, all of whom helped call him into leadership of a growing movement, first as a boy, then a student and a young pastor

In the same way that Eli helped the young Samuel understand that it was God calling him to be a prophet, so the young Martin learned from his parents, his Sunday School teachers his seminary professors, United Methodist pastor James Lawson and other teachers of non-violence, Rosa Parks and all who took personal risks for justice. His was also a "communal epiphany." The church is still called to call and nurture prophets as well as pastors. Contemporary heroes and leaders might be lifted up, alongside the justice-seeking work of the church through the Board of Church and Society or the World Council of Churches Decade to Overcome Violence. The WCC website (www.wcc-coe.org) is a source of worship materials.

"We shall arise at the sound of our name." (TFWS 2236) Multi-generational congregations might joyfully celebrate the church as a place where the wisdom of the seniors is available to inform the development of the young. If grandparents in the congregation live far from their grandchildren, or the children of the congregation are growing up without regular interaction with their grandparents, the aged Eli's mentoring of young Samuel might provide a springboard for exploring Foster Grandparent programs and other forms of intergenerational care and service. The biblical teaching that we come to know who we are in part through our elders could provide rich reflection, especially in various ethnic and immigrant communities where generational differences can instead become a source of conflict. In settings where various language ministries separate generations from one another, this Sunday's themes might provide an occasion for reunion and mutual recognition.

"The voice of God is calling its summons in our day..." (UMH 436) This Sunday is also designated as Human Relations Day in the UMC. This is one of the six special churchwide Sundays with offering to be celebrated in each United Methodist Church. The Human Relations Day offering supports church-based community developers in low-income, racial and ethnic minority communities and other com-

munity-based projects seeking understanding, rehabilitation and renewal. Interpretative materials found on the www.umc.org website include worship suggestions. The theme of "responding to the appearance of God in our midst" might be pursued in examining God's voice is heard through the cries of the world. Many have a sense, as in the time of Eli and Samuel, that the voice of God is rare in our time. How is God speaking to the people today? What is God speaking to the church today? As people of faith "blessed to be a blessing," how might our worship this day point in the direction of our role in helping to bring the Kingdom of God?

"Touched by the lodestone of your love, let all our hearts agree..." (UMH 561) Finally, this Sunday traditionally falls within the Week of Prayer of Christian Unity. Worship resources may be found through the website of the World Council of Churches and the UM General Commission on Christian Unity and Interreligious Concerns www.gccuic-umc.org. Dr. O'Day writes that in today's passage from John, "Jesus promises his disciples that he will be the place where God's activity on earth will be made visible..." The theme of unity in Christ might be explored. A pulpit exchange could be initiated. Representatives from neighboring congregations could be invited to assist in leading worship. Music and prayers from other traditions could enhance the liturgy. A fellowship and discussion time after the service might be provided to examine current church-uniting and church-dividing issues. A joint worship service sometime the following week could be planned and celebrated with neighbor congregations.

The hardest thing about planning worship for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany might just be deciding WHICH of its many possible themes to pursue. Start your planning early, pray God's guidance—and make room for new epiphanies to bless God's people! □



Patricia Farris is Senior Minister of First United Methodist Church in Santa Monica, California.