

# SERMON

## STARTERS

Brett Opalinski

January 5, 2003

### Epiphany of the Lord

Isa. 60:1-6, Ps. 72:1-7, 10-14,  
Eph. 3:1-12; Mt. 2:1-12

One thing that stands out in this story is the disobedience of the magi. We are told very little about these figures except that in their attempt to find the child born “King of the Jews,” they receive an audience with the great King Herod. In fact, it is Herod who points their search in the right direction, with instructions to come back with details. The orders are very clear. Yet, after their experience with the Christ, Matthew tells us that they went “home by another road,” blatantly disregarding the orders of the King. Their journey to the messiah led them to loving disobedience of even the most powerful one.

This story traditionally marks the season of Epiphany, the manifestation of Christ to the wise men. Yet, it urges us to probe deeper into the epiphanies in our own lives, and discern, like the magi, what roads God calls us to. It asks what powers we must say no to because of Christ’s manifestation to us: Consumerism? War? Dissensions that fuel only anger and hatred? These things call to us today just as Herod called to the wise men long ago. Yet, as Christ becomes manifest to his modern seekers, we, too, are asked to choose different roads: selflessness, peace, and love. The story of the magi is not just a story of long ago; it is a story of today.

January 12, 2003

### 1st Sunday after Epiphany

Mark 1:4-11, Gen. 1:1-5, Ps. 29,  
Acts 19:1-7

Once celebrated the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi by attending a Blessing of the Animals service. As I entered the sanctuary, I immediately noticed that the pews were filled not only

with people, but also with cats, dogs, hamsters, goldfish, and even a snake. New sounds also filled the sacred space. There was barking, howling, meowing, and the ever noticeable rattling of tags and leashes. Prayers were interspersed with the occasional, “down boy.” As the organ began playing “All Creatures of Our God and King,” the new voices blended with the singing in such a way that the choir could only be called “heavenly.” I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at the events taking place around me. Yet, I knew that something profound and spiritual was happening. It was a coming together of God’s creation that I had never experienced before, a gentle reminder that these creatures are part of God’s work, just as I am.

In modern society, this may be a difficult concept to grasp. We often approach nature as something to be used for human profit or benefit. Yet, the passages for this week, Psalm 29 and Genesis 1:1-5, are poignant reminders that creation is much more; it is the canvas of God. The Genesis passage asks us to look at simple event of morning, darkness giving way to light, and to see God’s presence. Psalm 29 tells us that even the turbulent aspects of nature, thunder, lightning, and blowing winds, point to our Creator. These texts call us to a new spiritual awareness. They ask us to walk the earth as people surrounded by reminders of God. They invoke the image of the painter who speaks to us through her work. They invite us to the epiphany of God in nature.

January 19, 2003

### 2nd Sunday after Epiphany

1 Sam. 3:1-10, (11-20), Ps. 139:1-6,  
13-18, 1 Cor. 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

From the perspective of Nathanael, this story makes an interesting claim; the work of God may not be quite as expected. It is obvious from Philip’s announcement that Nathanael had some religious background. He was at least familiar with the law, Moses and

the Prophets, and some understanding of how the messiah would come. Yet, for Nathanael, the story takes a different twist. The messiah will come from a most unexpected place, Nazareth. His response is priceless, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Things were not going to be as he had planned or believed!

How often do we ask the same question as Nathanael? We take it upon ourselves to determine who can and who can’t be an instrument of God’s peace. How often do we think, even subconsciously, if everyone would think as I, they would have truth? How often do we place God in the box of our understanding and become afraid when others think in different ways? Yet, as this story reveals, even our religious beliefs can be turned upside down in an encounter with Christ.

For many, mystery, upheaval, and uncertainty are frightening. This is a real fear to be approached pastorally. Yet, here it is also the means of Nathanael’s growth in discipleship. With Christ things often do not happen as planned or as we believe. God comes in unexpected people and places. What if Nathanael had never changed his views? What if we never change ours? The invitation stands, “come and see!”

January 26, 2003

### 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Ps. 62:5-12,  
1 Cor. 7:29-31, Mk. 1:14-20

End of the World” products are very popular in American society today. There are books, videos, tabloid articles, and even board games. The July 1, 2002 *Time Magazine* even had a cover story on this phenomenon. Although a Christianity based solely on fear of hell or the terror of an angry God turns me off, this end of time interest does raise some helpful issues for us. What does it mean to hold the end of our lives, death or the end of time, always before us?

In this Corinthian passage, Paul seems

to be expecting the end of a certain period of time. As a result, this prompts him to encourage the Corinthians to live their lives in a particular and meaningful way. The focus was not fear, but authentic living. Similarly, the Desert Mothers and Fathers of early Christianity were notorious for living life with death always before them. The intent was not simply fear, but encouragement for living in the present. Like Paul and the monks, if we think about the end our lives, it invites us to ask what relationships need to be reconciled? Where do we need to give and receive love? It allows us to stop and notice God's gifts in creation. Living in the shadow of a passing age is not solely about fear. It is also about discovering what it means to have abundant life here and now.

February 2, 2003  
**4th Sunday after Epiphany**  
Deut. 18:15-20, Ps. 111,  
1 Cor. 8:1-13; Mk. 1:21-28

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It is striking in this passage how Paul artfully ties Christian life and living with how one relates to others in the Corinthian community. Specifically, how one practices faith is not simply a matter of personal piety; Christians must account for how behavior will impact others. It makes a very strong claim that Paul understands Christianity as a communal faith. To emphasize this, Paul claims that when one member of the community harms another, it is a turning away from Christ. As a result, the characteristic feature of this community, according to verse one, is love.

While the Church today no longer struggles with the food issues of the Corinthian community, we still deal with how we relate to one another. How do we build one another up or tear one another down? I have sat through many Administrative Board meetings where power struggles turned into bitter divisions. I have seen church members bring unspeakable cruelty to pastors, as well as pastors seeking so much control that lay people cannot flourish. I believe that these are examples of modern stumbling blocks; they do not help us to grow in love. On the flip side, I have also seen churches gather around a sick or grieving member, raise money to help someone with a mortgage payment, and encourage each other in the way of discipleship. According to this passage, how we love

and relate to one another impacts what kind of Christian community we will be. Does our congregational life work to build love or prevent it?

February 9, 2003  
**5th Sunday after Epiphany**  
Isaiah 40:21-31; Ps. 147:1-11, 20c,  
1 Cor. 9:16-23, Mk. 1:29-39

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Living in Colorado, one of my favorite hobbies is to go mountain climbing. For me, though, it is more than good exercise. It is an experience of blessed insignificance. Being surrounded by nothing but towering snowy peaks, massive boulders, and alpine meadows full of wild flowers makes the powerful statement that I am not the center of the universe, but a very small part of it. The solitude is a reminder that I am the visitor here. It is a true expression of my identity. I am a small stroke in God's artwork of creation. Perhaps you, too, can think of special times and places when you were mindful of your place in God's world.

The passage for this week deals with human identity. It makes the claim that at the beginning and source of all things is God. It is where we come from and who we are. As we are born, we are born into God's design of creation. I don't believe that this suggests we are puppets without free will, but rather at our deepest nature is God. This is why it is so important to have love and respect for all people, even those who are evil. This is why we must not abuse the environment, even for the sake of profit. These, too, belong to God! Meister Eckhart once wrote, "... everything that is is bathed in God, is enveloped by God..."<sup>1</sup> When we can turn our minds to this foundation, the world will look different and God's Kingdom of Peace will come even closer.

February 16, 2003  
**6th Sunday after Epiphany**  
2 Kings 5:1-14; Ps. 30;  
1 Cor. 9:24-27; Mk. 1:40-45

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Growing up, the common religious understanding was that salvation involved simply stating what one believed intellectually; "I believe Jesus is Son of God." This one time event constituted being "saved" or "born again." Actions were important,

but relegated to a place of lower significance. This is still a meaningful view for many in our churches today. Without dismissing the importance of the intellectual aspect of faith, through reading the Gospels, Paul, and the early Christian writers, I have started to see being "born again" as more. It is the daily decisions of how we live and organize our lives. It is a journey that goes beyond a one-time event, to a lifetime of practice and transformation.

This Corinthian passage reveals Paul's understanding of the Christian life as a process. It is compared to a race of endurance. Paul engages in practices of self-control so as to remain faithful on this journey. In the same way, we remain faithful to our calling by growing in God, by becoming more like Christ. This does not happen overnight, but is a gradual process of transformation. The race that we run is to allow God to shape our lives in love, and practice it in our daily relations. It is a process of constant growth. Like Paul, we gradually move toward that "imperishable wreath."

February 23, 2003  
**7th Sunday after Epiphany**  
Isa. 43:18-25; Ps. 41;  
2 Cor. 1:18-22; Mark 2:1-12

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What is the miracle in this story? At first glance the story appears to be about a paralytic who after an encounter with Jesus was able to walk again. However, note what Jesus says when the paralytic is first brought before him, "Son, your sins are forgiven." (NRSV) Nether the paralytic nor his friends even asked to be forgiven. Yet, forgiveness is the center of the story for Jesus. In fact, it so startles others present that they begin questioning Jesus about his authority to forgive sins. It is only then that the physical healing occurs. Is it possible that the real healing here is forgiveness?

A friend recently gave me the book *No Future Without Forgiveness* by Bishop Desmond Tutu. In it he writes, "Christians are constrained by the imperatives of this gospel: the good news of a God who had a bias for sinners contrary to the normal standards of the world." This bias for sinners is so great that, "we will be surprised at those we will find in heaven whom we had not expected to encounter there."<sup>2</sup> In a deep sense, forgiveness is true healing. It is a restoring of relationship that Jesus

offered before people even requested it. Similarly, when we engage in an act of forgiveness we extend Jesus' healing miracle. Even those we deem as beyond help can be redeemed in God's eyes. Let us not, then, forget or ignore the pain and suffering of evil, but may we have the grace to allow Christ's healing miracle of forgiveness to rise to the surface and make our brokenness whole. □

<sup>1</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Meditations with Meister Eckhart*, Introduction and Versions by Matthew Fox, O.P. (Rochester, Vermont: Bear & Company, 1983), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Desmond Mpilo Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York, New York: An Image Book Published by Doubleday, 1999), 84-85.



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