

# Sundays of Epiphany 2024 Messages

From Pastor Staker

Bethel Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Russell, Kentucky

*The Epiphany of Our Lord – Jan. 6 – No Service*

*The Baptism of Our Lord – Jan. 7 – “The Baptism Of Our Lord”*

Second Sunday After – Jan. 14 – *“Can Anything Good Come  
Out Of Nazareth?”*

Third Sunday After – Jan. 21 – *“God Is Calling Do You  
Answer”*

Fourth Sunday After – Jan. 28 – *“Not Your Typical Sabbath  
Worship”*

Fifth Sunday After – Feb. 4 – *“Jesus Everyone Is Looking  
For You”*

*Transfiguration of Our Lord – Feb. 11 – “Denali Faith”*

# “*THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD*”

Message for *The Baptism Of Our Lord* Sunday

From Pastor Norman Staker

January 7, 2024

GENESIS 1: 1-5 — ACTS 19: 1-7 — MARK 1: 4-11

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

Several years ago, during a wedding ceremony in Australia, while those in the wedding party were posing for pictures on a rather scenic ledge, a woman, unrelated to the wedding, fell into the water and couldn't swim. Naturally it called for quick action and even though he was dressed in his tuxedo, the best man jumped into the water and brought the woman back to shore; remember she was not part of the wedding at all, not even a guest. Fortunately, the bride, who was an RN, started administering CPR. By the time the EMT's had arrived, the woman had regained consciousness. The victim was lucky that the bridal party was there and acted quickly. After the daring rescue operation, the drenched but heroic best man and bride happily rejoined the wedding reception. That is a true story!

What's even better and also true is that Jesus did the same for us. He jumped into the waters of sinful humanity to bring us back to life. The how is important but the why is more important. Jesus stepped into water, for a baptism he didn't need, to save people who didn't deserve it. And why; because he was implementing God's plan to save sinners like us.

God sent a man named John who was a cousin of Jesus and who was quite the sight to behold. We've heard about John in previous gospel texts.

In Advent we heard about this strange man, how he was in the Judean wilderness outside of Jerusalem, and how he was proclaiming the way of the Lord, and baptizing the people for the repentance of sins.

Today, we return to John, and go down by the riverside. This time it's the Gospel writer Mark's turn. What do we see?

We see a man. Rough. Weather-worn. Big as all outdoors, and dressed like it, too. Wearing camel's hair. Not what most would call a professional. Certainly not a city-slicker. Whatever he is, he is not a suit, a cutesy word for men who wear expensive suits. Camel's hair is not fancy suit material. What else do we see? People. Lots of them. And all kinds. Mark writes the whole Judean countryside was there. Farming people, country people. Good people. You know who they are.

And who else? Mark writes that not only was the Judean countryside there, but also "all of Jerusalem" was coming out there too. All of Jerusalem means not only that there were many people from Jerusalem, but that all kinds and types of people were there. Merchants, laborers, and craftsmen. Men, women, and children. But also the society and cultural types: the priests and the Levites, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Zealots. All of Jerusalem was coming out there. From high to low, all kinds were there. So this was some kind of happening. It was some kind of happening to draw all. It was some kind of happening that all were there.

What was happening? A call to preparation and repentance. A baptism for the repentance of sins. This wild man, this prophet, was new, and was saying new things, "prepare the way of the Lord." But baptism was not new. Oh, for sure, this baptism, "for the repentance of sins," was different. But baptism itself was not new.

And Jesus' baptism. We mark this event every year on the first Sunday of Epiphany. Epiphany means "manifestation." The season sheds light on Jesus' identity. It reveals the shape of his ministry.

Jesus' baptism launches this holy ministry. Jesus went into the wilderness area where John was baptizing people in the Jordan River. Now, the Jordan River conveyed hope and promise to the people of Israel. The river marked the end of Israel's long 40-year Exodus when they returned to the Promised Land from slavery in Egypt. And now John the Baptist was conducting his ministry at this very place so bursting with significance.

John was calling people to take a good look at themselves. He wanted them to see where they had veered away from God's will. His baptism called them to return to their true selves. John was preparing Israel for the momentous thing God was about to do.

Jesus joins the throngs going to see John. This sinless Son of God waits in line to be baptized among all the unrighteous. Jesus certainly doesn't need to be baptized. He is fully aligned with the divine will. But there he is. He stands along side of the tax collectors and soldiers, the prostitutes and adulterers and cheats.

Jesus doesn't need this, but there he is. This is how he initiates his ministry! There's something about this baptism that is essential for Jesus. He NEEDS it, even if HE doesn't need it. Being here on the banks of the Jordan River, Jesus begins his earthly work by consenting to this baptism of repentance.

Jesus is just like us as a human. The difference is in his ministry and how he wanted to accompany us in all of our humanity. He thirsts, he hungers, he gets sick. He is embraced and hurt by family; he is supported and deceived by friends. He sleeps, he shivers with cold and sweats from the heat. He gets cut and bleeds. He revels in good food. He feels the pain of loneliness, the confusion of uncertainty. He is tempted.

One evangelist said, "It would be an understatement to say John the Baptizer swam upstream." His reasoning: He broke with all religious traditions; He was baptizing Jews and that was not normal practice for Jewish people. In John's day baptism was for Gentiles who wanted to become Jews. John was calling people to repent and change their behavior, asking them to be baptized. No wonder the Pharisees questioned his action.

Mark tells us that Jesus traveled from Nazareth to the Jordan River. Once there, Jesus steps into the water, to be baptized yes, but for a baptism He didn't need.

Jesus, God's Son, the Messiah, the Almighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Jesus steps into the water. With water dripping from his hands, John proclaimed: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

As Jesus came up out of the water following his baptism by John in the Jordan, was there some kind of light that accompanied the descending dove and the heavenly voice? Was this some mystical experience that would prefigure the dazzling light that we'll see in a few weeks at the Transfiguration, along with a voice from the cloud that nearly repeats today's heavenly pronouncement with an additional statement; 'This is my Son the Beloved; listen to him!' Listen to him!

Well, so what about this baptism by John? Is it not a contradiction in terms? An oxymoron? Even John seemed to know that his baptism would be pointless, even wasted, for Jesus. In fact, in the account from Matthew's gospel chapter 3, John even attempts to prevent Jesus from being baptized: John tried to deter him, saying 'I need to be baptized by you and do you come to me? Jesus replied, saying, 'Let it be so now. It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.' Then, scripture says, John consented.

Again the question did Jesus need to be baptized? Probably not. Think about it; a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins for the Light of the World, for the sinless, perfect Son of God would be pointless! Does Jesus need to be baptized? Then again, maybe a need was met after all. Hmmm.

Someone has compared this contradiction of terms, Jesus and baptism, to the phrase 'marital' and 'bliss.' One newspaper writer wrote, 'Some believe the perception of marriage has changed from 'until death do us part' to 'until the divorce papers are finalized.'

Celebrity weddings, and not just limited to Hollywood weddings, but these celebrity weddings may last only days or even hours. Watch TV and show after show portrays married people in adulterous relationships, making a travesty of marriage. The idea of a lifetime commitment is not the norm if you will. Have we gotten to the point where marital bliss makes about as much sense as Jesus' baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? Or have we gotten to a point where Jesus' baptism gives us hope in the face of our culture's throwaway concept of marriage?

Sadly, we just had the funeral for Virginia, our oldest charter member, married to another charter member, Sam, for 64 years, 64 years! That's just a few years shy of my actual age! Did you know that only 5 percent of couples today will reach their 50th anniversary, 5%!! And those couples have been blessed with good health and those couples have put good work in their relationships. I know that neither Sam nor Virginia would deny how hard it is sometimes to make a marriage work but they did. I know that there are others in our congregation who have worked as hard to keep their marriages together, who either have been or are married for 50+ years, by keeping God in the center, and sticking to the promise, till death do us part.

Everyone knows John 3:16; it's basically the 66 books of the Bible rolled into one verse, the gospel in a nutshell. There is another verse like it, I John 4:10, "This is

love; not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” It is a true love story that stops the fear of death and offers hope for people who have lost friendship with their Creator. It began in heaven. It would find completion on earth at the cross of Jesus.

The beginning of our restoration to friendship with our God, becomes visible in the waters of the Jordan where we hear the voice from heaven. “You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

The good news of the gospel is that you can do nothing to make yourself more acceptable to God over and above what Jesus has already done at Calvary. We dare not ask the same question that the young lawyer asked Jesus. “What must I do to earn eternal life.” We cannot add to what Jesus has done; we can not take away from it. By trusting in the blood of Jesus shed on the cross, the sense of unworthiness, the sense of guilt and the condemnation we so much deserve are all removed. The work of Jesus is final and finished. It was enough to satisfy the holy demands of a just God. The same voice of the Holy Spirit that spoke to Jesus on the day of His baptism is the same Holy Spirit that enables us to “hear the voice of Jesus.”

Wow! What an event Jesus’ baptism was. But do you realize that your baptism was quite the event too? When water was poured over your head and God’s name was pronounced, all heaven broke loose as the Holy Spirit descended on you to create or to strengthen faith and God the Father proclaimed: “This is my child whom I love.” The holy God can claim us sinners as his children because baptism really washes away sin. The forgiveness we receive there is as real as the baptismal water dripping down the forehead, for that is God’s promise.

Thank God for your baptism – the day on which all heaven broke loose and poured out on you.

Amen.

# *“CAN ANYTHING GOOD COME OUT OF NAZARETH?”*

Message for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

From Pastor Norman Staker

January 14, 2024

1 SAMUEL 3: 1-10 (11-20) — 1 CORINTHIANS 6: 12-20 — JOHN 1: 43-51

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST, THE BEST THING TO COME  
OUT OF NAZARETH. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS RISEN INDEED!!

**T**here is an old saying, ‘you can’t send a boy to do a man’s work.’ Or can you? God seemed to do just that. In fact, if one were to review God’s choices of prophets and leaders in the scriptures, God seemed to make many curious choices. No we’re not going to look at each one but consider people like Jacob, Moses, David, Jonah, Jeremiah, Mary, Paul. Today we learn about Samuel.

It’s a dark time in the history of God’s people. We read in verse 1 of our text today that, ‘The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.’ Was God really silent? Or was it that no one was listening? Had even the faithful given up hope of hearing a life-changing word from God? Eli is getting old and feeble. His eyes are growing dim; he could no longer see the light. Had all of God’s people gone to sleep? Then there were His sons; to say they were pathetic is no understatement; they were pathetic failures, even blasphemers of God. You might even say they were corrupt; they were disrespectful; they were unfit; you know, all those things that you don’t want in a priest!

So who rides in on a white camel, well not really, but there were no stallions available; seriously, who rides in to save the day? None other than young Samuel. What do we know about Samuel prior to God’s call? We know he has a faithful mother, Hannah. It is Hannah’s faith that places young Samuel in the care of the

priest Eli. We also know his mother faithfully visits him year in and year out. We know that Samuel is growing in stature and favor with God and with the people. But that's it. That's his entire resume. And he's the one who will deliver a message to the people so stunning that it 'will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.'

I've called Samuel young a couple of times; just how old is he? An ancient historian places him at about 12 years old. Quite evidently Samuel is not used to hearing the voice of God. To set a time frame; both Eli and Samuel lived before King Saul and King David, before the temple. Israel, as we knew it then, was just 12 tribes in a loose-knit federation led by heads of family and by judges who sometimes exercised military, legal and/or priestly functions. Eli was one such priestly judge.

This is where Samuel grew up. On this night, he's curled up on his goat hair blanket, just about asleep and someone called his name, 'Samuel, Samuel.' But note how he doesn't respond, doesn't respond. He doesn't say, 'Go away, let me sleep longer.' He didn't assume a friend was playing a joke. He didn't brush it aside as some weird dream. He acted as if this summons was true. He got up and went, saying, 'Here I am. What is my task?' And poor old Eli; it takes 3 times for Eli to get it; to get that God is talking to his foster son! What do you suppose Eli is thinking? Is he jealous that God chose this young pup of a kid who doesn't even know who God is? Is he excited that God's voice is being heard once again? Is it fear because God doesn't tend to speak up when things are good? Whatever it was, his words to Samuel were courageous. 'Go back. Hear what God has to say.' And young Samuel obeyed. Remember Samuel had run to Eli and said, 'Here I am, for you called me!' And Eli said, 'I did not call, my son, go lie down again.'

Samuel finally obeyed and did as Eli suggested, 'If he calls you, you shall say, Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.' Then the Lord said to Samuel, 'See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle.'

Our text says, 'Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. He was afraid to tell about his vision to Eli, but Eli insisted and Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him.' Samuel is a 12 year old boy so imagine a 12-year-old boy delivering a word of judgment to a long-standing priest. Samuel does just that after some prodding by Eli. At first, Samuel is reluctant to speak the message for fear it will hurt Eli. Besides, who's going to



believe a 12 year old boy? God told Samuel that Eli's family is going to be punished for their wickedness.

Samuel grew to be a trustworthy prophet of the Lord, never letting any of his words 'fall to the ground,' never shying away from what needed to be said. Which brings up the subject of us, you and me. What does all of that have to do with us? Ask yourself, does God's word fall on my deaf ears? Do I listen, but refuse to obey?

We may complain in our troubles that God has abandoned us, that God never cared! We may treat God like a bail bondsman, that he's only there to bail us out of our troubles, or we may go our merry way, and discover that we have become like Eli, blind to sin in our own midst.

The good news is that God is stubborn; He doesn't give up on us so we shouldn't give up on Him. God's work doesn't depend on our belief! Samuel didn't know the Lord but God came to him anyway. God came to Samuel, not because Samuel sought him out. Also, God doesn't discriminate; Eli was old; Samuel was young; God used both; and God can use us too, all of us, young and old!

Again, the question, how does that apply to us today? Is God still choosing people who are young, who can't speak well, who seem even hostile to the Word? Is God calling you?

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus is calling disciples. I mean, look at that group of men. Nothing spectacular there. Fishermen, a tax collector, plain ordinary people. You would think that if Jesus wanted to get something done in a hurry, he would have picked some priests and scribes and lawyers; maybe a Roman governor or an emperor into his group of close disciples, not fishermen and tax collectors. But, no, Jesus was satisfied to call quite ordinary people. According to the story, John the Baptist is preaching. John points to Jesus. "Behold the Lamb of God!" he says. Two of John's disciples—Andrew, and one other (perhaps John, the writer of the Gospel) follow Jesus. Andrew finds Peter, who in turn follows Jesus.

Jesus, a little later, calls Philip to follow. And Philip, in turn, finds Nathanael. "We have found the Messiah!" he tells him, the one spoken of, prophesied in the Scriptures. "He is Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph."

Nathanael's response: "Nazareth? Can anything good come out Nazareth?" Why would Nathanael say that? Why the negative, seemingly condescending response?

This phrase this question, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”—is found within the story of Jesus calling his first disciples. Scholars have debated that for centuries.

Some possibilities:

--Theological reasons. Nazareth is not mentioned in the Old Testament. No prophet comes from there. There are no references to it as having a role in the coming of the Messiah. Bethlehem is mentioned, as the Messiah’s birthplace but there is no theological significance assigned specifically to the village of Nazareth.

--Another theory, it could be an ethnic slur. Galilean Jews would have been exposed to more Gentile populations living in the area, which was not considered such a good thing.

--Or, Nathanael’s comment could reflect civic snobbery. Perhaps the Judeans considered Nazareth an inferior place. Maybe even morally inferior, it may have developed a reputation for meanness, wickedness, disrespect for the law, unbelief.

--Or it might just be that it was considered by many to be a rural “backwater”—unimportant, inferior in the minds of the elites; what might be referred today as “Podunk USA.”

--Or all of the above!

For whatever reason, Nazareth, not only in the mind of Nathanael, but in the minds of many, would have been considered the absolute last place that anything good, or any one good, especially the long awaited Messiah, would come from!

How would you have filled in the blank, ‘can anything good come out of?’

God says, Yes, absolutely! “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

That question gets asked once again, in the story, several years later. Jesus, now betrayed, rejected, run out on. Still worse, persecuted, prosecuted, led up a hill called Calvary. Place on a cross between two thieves. Many ask themselves: “Can anything good come out of this situation?” Can anything good possibly come out of this set of circumstances?

Two disciples, on the road to Emmaus on the evening of the first Easter Day, an upcoming story, are discussing recent, tragic events. Their hopes and dreams crushed. A stranger comes up behind them. They pour out their hearts to him. They ask him, not exactly in these words, but in a roundabout way: “Can anything good come out of what has just occurred?”

But that “stranger” is Jesus! Jesus risen from the dead! Having died a terrible death, under the worst of circumstances, for our salvation.

So the answer: “Can anything good come out of (fill in the blank)?” is always, and eternally, ‘Yes, a resounding yes!’

Great good, perhaps the greatest good, can come out of such circumstances and so often it’s unforeseen by those in positions of power.

Our first reading for today is the “Call of Samuel.” What Samuel needed to do was....listen for God’s voice. God’s calling and a willingness to go where God leads!

It is out of the most dire of circumstances and most difficult of circumstances...perhaps the most surprising places comes the greatest opportunity for ministry. And the greatest good!

“Can anything good come out of Russell KY or Ironton OH or Franklin Furnace OH?” The answer is: Yes, always and eternally! Yes! Because of Jesus, who loves us, and calls us, to follow.

You may disagree with me but most of us are plain, ordinary people. This doesn’t rule out the possibility that there’s an extraordinary person in our group, maybe a future billionaire, a future Olympian, a politician who can touch the lives of thousands, perhaps the best cardiac surgeon in the world. Surely there are people like that among God’s people. But most of us claim no great place in history. We do our jobs, we raise our families, we care for our homes, we go to school, whatever it takes to get us through the week.

And God is calling us; God is calling us or we wouldn’t be here today! When God calls, we tend to be like Samuel and do not hear God’s voice correctly. Or we may make excuses like Moses and Jeremiah. Or we may be contrary to the call like Jonah. Yet God calls and calls and calls some more.

A young man accepted Christ. A little while later, a Christian teacher asked him: "What have you done for Christ since you believed?" He said, "Oh, I'm only a learner."

"Well, when you light a candle do you light it to make the candle more comfortable, or to have it give light?" He said, "Well... to give light."

"Do you expect it to give light after it is half burned, or when you first light it?" He replied, "As soon as I light it, of course."

"OK," said the teacher, "Why should you be any different? Go and do likewise." We've all been called to Christ. We've been called into a relationship with our Lord and Savior. We've all come through our own path, and our own calling to meet God. But, each of us sheds light in our own way.

Folks, please notice, the first calling, the initial calling, comes from God. God discovers us as we are, where we are and calls us to serve him. God acts first, then we respond. The first step is to discover God in your life. And for most of us that begins at baptism. It is in that event of Baptism where God first encountered you. The beginning of the process began there. And that beginning is important. The first step of any undertaking is an important step. Having a relationship established with God is a very important part of this process. And it is God who begins that process, God comes to you, God discovers you as a baby, who doesn't know anything about God, but that's all right because it is God who acts.

There is an old hymn which says: "Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, Calling for you and for me; See, on the portals He's waiting and watching, Watching for you and for me. Come home, come home, Ye who are weary come home, Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, Calling O sinner come home." Jesus is calling, God is calling, calling us into a relationship with him. The next step is up to us; how do we answer that call?

AMEN!!

# *“GOD IS CALLING DO YOU ANSWER?”*


Message for the Third Sunday after Epiphany

From Pastor Norman Staker

January 21, 2024

JONAH 3: 1-5, 10 — 1 CORINTHIANS 7: 29-31 — MARK 1: 14-20

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS  
RISEN INDEED!!

ne Sunday morning the Schmidt family was driving home from church where Dad Bob had preached a “great” sermon. His 9 year old son, Jon said, “Dad, when I grow up, I’ve decided to be a preacher. Bob thought that perhaps his message

had touched his son. He said, “Well Jon, last week I thought you wanted to be a football player.” “I know,” said Jon, “but during church today I realized that I’m going to be going to church every Sunday for the rest of my life and that’s a long time. So, I decided that it would be more fun to be standing and shouting that just sitting and listening!”

Suddenly Pastor Bob’s bubble burst. His son’s revelation wasn’t exactly the “good news” that he had anticipated. I’m sure it wasn’t after hearing his reasoning!

What about this riddle? “A man walks into a bar and asks the bartender for a glass of water. The bartender pulls out a gun and points it at the man with a menacing look like he’s going to pull the trigger at any moment. The man says, ‘Thank you,’ and hurriedly walks out. What is going on?”

It all makes sense, when you know the rest of the story: ‘The man had the hiccups, and he wanted a drink of water to get rid of them. Fear works better than water, however, and the threat of the gun caused enough fear to get rid of the hiccups.’

In our first reading this morning, it begins ‘The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, ‘get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.’ But don’t we want to hear the good part? The actual story

starts: ‘Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying; go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.’ God said, Go at once; right now; immediately! And Jonah went, alright, as far as he could go in the opposite direction. Then the rest of the story. A storm at sea, being pitched overboard by pagan sailors more willing to do the will of Jonah’s God than was Jonah; being swallowed by that big fish, but not consumed, there is a difference; just stuck there to think about it, about what he coulda, shoulda done. After 3 days, he gets spit out on dry land, he’s given a second chance, and finally does what God requires of him which is our first reading today. The Ninevites respond by repenting in a rather grand fashion, and God relents from punishing. That should be the end of the story and it is, but not for Jonah. He wanted more. Jonah got really, really annoyed with God for forgiving such a degenerate community. I knew it! Your forgiving nature is exactly why I didn’t want to come here. These people don’t deserve your forgiveness and should be wiped off the face of the earth. So I’m just going to sit here, pout, and hope to die. So there!

God could have done to Jonah what Jonah hoped would happen to Nineveh. He could have but he provides shade for Jonah, then allows the vine to die. Take that Jonah! Then, God engages Jonah in a conversation about what real grace might look like. And our story ends, with no indication that Jonah came around to God’s way of thinking. But wait a minute; we like things to come to a solid conclusion, don’t we? What if we were to put ourselves in this story as one of the characters, and not necessarily Jonah? We might learn something about ourselves; we might experience God in a deeper, more meaningful way.

Like in Jonah’s case, sometimes there has to be more to a story, and today’s Gospel story is one of those times.

Today Jesus begins the movement into history called the kingdom of God. After his dramatic baptism, Jesus goes forth to recapture enemy territory. At last! God is going to get back what belongs to God. The revolution begins today!

And what’s the first thing Jesus does? What is his first dramatic, decisive act of revolutionary reclamation?

He sees a couple of guys mending their nets beside the sea. He says to them, ‘Follow me!’ Jesus spoke to Peter and Andrew, says ‘follow me’ and they drop everything they are doing and follow. Our text says ‘and immediately they left their nets.’ Now one might expect these two fishermen to ask, who are you? Where

are you going? But no, they just drop what they are doing and follow Jesus. They become his disciples. We aren't told that these two men have any training in discipleship, or that they have any particular natural gifts for following Jesus. Doesn't matter; they stumble after him and the kingdom of God gets going. Why would they leave a good family business to follow Jesus? There has to be more to the story. Jesus went a little farther, we're told, and saw James, son of Zebedee and his brother John who were in their boat mending the nets. Again that word 'immediately,' immediately he called them; and they left their father in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

As you and I read about the calling of Peter and Andrew, James and John, we probably think to ourselves, 'Wait a minute, this just doesn't seem realistic. Jesus speaks and they jump? They just leave everything and follow Him? They've been fishing all their lives but someone says 'follow me' and off they go. It's a good thing they weren't in charge of some big corporation! Either what happened is an exaggeration of what actually happened or it's some kind of divine intervention. Is this any way to build a kingdom? What sort of invading army is this, a group of untrained, uneducated, untalented fishermen and eventually tax collectors stumbling along after Jesus? Either way, it's not something I can relate to. There's no way I'd just walk away from my current life on a moment's notice.'

And with that kind of thinking, many of us dismiss this passage as ancient history, with little or no application to our lives.

But, wait a minute; not so fast. There may have been a fair amount of interactive history between Jesus and these men before they made their decision to leave home and take up with him. Some New Testament scholars suggest that this was just the defining moment in what had been a longer process of Jesus pulling on their heartstrings, that they had met him some time earlier and heard him preach and teach.

Maybe, just maybe, what we have in our story today is not the sudden and impulsive decision of four fishermen, nor the divine intervention of God, so much as the reasoned and deliberate choice of four individuals. These four, after a period of exposure to the compelling invitation of Jesus, chose to follow him. Viewed in this light, the calling of the disciples and their faith-filled response takes on a new and more realistic perspective, one that we should carefully explore for its application to our lives. With that in mind, the phone's ringing; it's God; do you answer it or dismiss it as a wrong number? Then again, a wrong number from God; I don't think so.

When we look at the world, we see so many things that are not right: inequality, injustice, poverty, bribery, and lack of concern for the poor and oppressed. Economic and political powers are too often corrupt, and the powerful abuse the weak. We dream of a world of justice, where all is made right.

In the Old Testament, that vision of a world made right was focused in the coming Messiah. Isaiah 11:2-5 describes the Messiah: “The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him; the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord; and he will delight in the fear of the Lord with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.” The Messiah would rule over a kingdom of righteousness and justice.

Andrew, one of the four fishermen that day, hoped and prayed that God’s kingdom of righteousness would come, and soon. When John the Baptist began to preach at the Jordan River, Andrew walked more than 50 miles to repent of his sins and be baptized by John. When Andrew saw what was wrong with the world, he didn’t place the blame only on the rich and powerful, or the undeserving poor. He recognized that it was not just “those people”—evil, stupid, mean, or undeserving—who were not right. He admitted that he was not right, and he needed to be changed by God’s King, the Messiah.

John caused quite an uproar in Judea, and the Pharisees asked John whether he was the Messiah. He said no; he was the one preparing the way for the Messiah. He quoted a prophecy of Isaiah: “I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”

Imagine what it was like to spend time with Jesus. What would he have said? What would you have asked him? How would you feel as you got to know this amazing man?

While Andrew was talking with Jesus, he was wondering whether Jesus really was the Chosen One, the Messiah. Maybe he asked him about some of the Old Testament prophecies, and maybe he shared his hopes for God’s people to be redeemed and righteousness to be established. Or maybe he just listened, as Jesus talked about God’s promises and their fulfillment.



After spending several hours with Jesus, Andrew found his brother, Simon Peter, saying, “We have found the Messiah.” It seems that Simon was also at the Jordan, as Andrew brought him to meet Jesus.

Simon and Andrew didn’t stay with Jesus, however. The Spirit sent Jesus into the wilderness alone, to be tempted by Satan. I imagine that Andrew and Simon didn’t know what to do. Simon and Andrew did what we might have done; they went back to work. I suppose they were disappointed that nothing was happening on the Messiah front, or maybe they knew they just needed to wait.

When Jesus called Andrew and Simon to follow him as disciples, they were immediately all in. They left their nets in the hands of their employees, jumped out of the boat onto the shore to follow him. A little farther on, Jesus saw James and John getting ready to go out on the water, and he called them too. They also followed him immediately.

Why did these fishermen leave their nets to follow Jesus? They longed for the Messiah, and they believed Jesus might be Him. But there was more: they wanted their lives to count.

You want your life to count for something, don’t you? I’d say we all want our lives to count for something, and sometimes it is hard to figure out how we can have a lasting impact. Few of us will be publicly recognized for doing great things, or changing the course of history. How can we make our lives count?

Simon and Andrew were commercial fishermen—nothing wrong with that—but they wanted more. Jesus offered them more: “Come, follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people.”

Jesus was calling them to leave their jobs—at least temporarily—to do something different. Must everyone who wants to make an impact in the kingdom of God leave their job to become a pastor or missionary? I didn’t and you folks and the Bishop and his staff at the time, Bishop Holloway, have been very receptive to my working outside the church.

I read about a man who went to seminary after being a shoe salesman. His clever saying was, “I used to sell soles; now I save souls.” Does a pastor have a greater role in the kingdom than a salesman? Not necessarily; some salesmen are great evangelists.

When Jesus called the fishermen to follow him, they didn't hesitate. In fact, Mark keeps repeating the same word, "immediately," you know my feelings about that word, immediately to emphasize the urgency of the call of Jesus, and the response of these first disciples.

Is Jesus calling you today? Jesus calls. He calls now—this day. You might not hear the call tomorrow. You might be too busy, distracted, or it might be too late to respond. He calls now.

How will you respond to his call today and this week?

Jesus says, "The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!...Follow me."

**AMEN!!**

# “*NOT YOUR TYPICAL SABBATH WORSHIP*”

Message for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

From Pastor Norman Staker

January 28, 2024

DEUTERONOMY 18: 15-20 — 1 CORINTHIANS 8: 1-13 — MARK 1: 21-28

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS  
RISEN INDEED!!

**W**hat do you expect when you attend a worship service? We have certain expectations of what we'll experience in worship. If we're at our home church, we have our favorite spot to sit. Maybe the pew has “our name” on it. We're familiar with the format of the service, who the regular attendees are. We know the particular cadence of the organist when he plays our favorite hymns. Some are slow and meditative; some are energized and lively. We know when to stand up and when to sit down. And we're familiar with our pastor's preaching style.

So much of our worship experience is well anticipated. What do you come away with from worship? What was your favorite part of the worship service?

For the most part, we know what to expect when we come to a worship service. The curve balls come when we worship in a congregation different from our home church.

Seriously, what word or words describe your experience during worship; of course, each Sunday is different? Are you uplifted; bored; challenged; energized; disappointed; edified; or entertained? Any of those words fit or do you have another one?

Whatever words you use, you probably would not use “astounded” or “amazed.” But that is what people felt and how Mark described it when Jesus stepped into the Capernaum synagogue on that Sabbath day. It knocked their socks off! It was “Not Your Typical Sabbath Worship.”

What if you heard this conversation? Esther, Reuben you should have been at Sabbath service last night! I know your kids were sick and you couldn't come, but it was worship like you've never seen before! I certainly hadn't. I expected the usual routine; the synagogue leader would invite one of the older, respected elders or rabbis to read from the Torah. You know, the ones who always sit at the benches along the side reserved for the dignitaries. Instead, the leader asked that new guy in town, Jesus, to read and speak. You remember him; he recently moved here from Nazareth! Yes, I know Nathanael even asked can anything good come from Nazareth? Anyway, I knew from the minute he took the scroll to read that last night's worship would be different. The way he unrolled it, as if he knew beforehand what it would say, which scroll he had been given. And after he unrolled it, he looked around at those gathered. He truly saw each person. Why, he even looked up to the women's balcony where I sat with the others behind the screen looking down on worship. I could swear that he looked right at me! His gaze was gentle, but seemed to penetrate to my very heart. I felt for a moment that he knew the deepest desire of my soul. But then, his attention turned back to the Word; he began to chant the psalm, 'I will praise the Lord in the congregation! In the assembly of the people!' When he sang, he brought to life the journey our ancestors took from Egypt to the promised land; he made it so real that it was as if I myself had trudged through the desert, eaten the manna provided by God. It was like he was singing only to me!

Then, that awful man wandered in again! You know who I'm talking about. He never goes home anymore. He sleeps on the edges of the fields outside of town, snatches food from the garbage heaps, and scares the children with his mutterings and growling. I know I should feel sorry for him but he just disgusts and frightens me. Last night, he started in again with this voice that didn't even sound human. "Jesus of Nazareth! What have you to do with us? Have you come to destroy us?"

You could have heard a pin drop. But then Jesus looked right at the man; he wasn't afraid at all; he just said in a ringing voice; be silent, come out of him!

And he was silent, at first. Time stood still. Then, the poor man twisted and convulsed and fell to the ground. And then, a miracle; he began to breathe deeply; his eyes became focused and he looked at Jesus as if Jesus had pulled him from the edge of hell.

At first, we were all stunned into silence. But then you could hear everyone mumbling and babbling at once. No one had ever seen anything like it, not even

the eldest among us. The men's voices drifted up to the women's balcony in little snippets: 'Maybe Jesus was possessed! No, no he couldn't be. He must be a powerful man of God, a prophet. Maybe, but whoever he is, we should keep an eye on him. I'm suspicious. This Jesus could be a dangerous man.'

Those are the kinds of things I heard others saying. But this is what happened for me; I tell you, the chains fell from my own heart. A tiny light broke into my darkness. And I dared to hope! I dared to hope! If Jesus could do this for that man, could it happen to me also?

We've been reading from the Gospel of Mark, no, not every Sunday but aside from the proclamation that the 'kingdom of God has come near,' Mark records no introduction on Jesus' part about who he is or what he is about. He simply invites people, 'follow me.' Simon and Andrew, James and John make it look so easy; they just follow; no questions asked! If this is what true discipleship looks like, how can we ever measure up? But that's not the point. I remember very well that Sunday morning before Sunday School had started and being approached by Pastor Hatch with words like, 'Margaret Messick, the Assistant to the Bishop, wants to talk to you about pastoring a small congregation in Kentucky. My response was not one of 'Consider it done, I'm the guy they want,' you remember that word 'immediately;' it wasn't 'let me think about it;' no, 'it was why me, what did I do?! Why does she want to talk to me; I'm not ordained.' Well you have a meeting with her Tuesday evening at 7pm; can you be there! Well, yes I guess I can. By the way, Pastor Boss recommended you. I had so much respect for Pastor Boss. I've told you before, that, like John the Baptist and his reference to Jesus, I was not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. Little did I know it was to be the beginning of a long and beautiful ministry which still continues to this day.

I found out just how quickly Jesus can call people and the ways he can call people. Those four fishermen couldn't have been moved by the same things. Maybe Simon was frustrated by Roman dominance over his country and the news of a new kingdom caught his ear; maybe Andrew was itching to do something different and inspiring. Did James and John sense a call other than inheriting their father's business? Jesus would go on to invite dozens of others to join him, surely each discerning the call in a unique way, people like me.

This was the very first event of Jesus' ministry. This worship service launched everything! Jesus is the guest preacher for the day. What were people expecting?

Sometimes hearing there's a guest preacher, you want to groan. Oh, no, not a guest preacher! Well, I wasn't planning to go to church today anyway.

But for sure, nobody, not even Peter, Andrew, James and John, anticipated what was going to happen that day! Jesus "teaches." It's a significant word. He teaches. For good Jews, teaching is Torah, which are the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. Sometimes we hear Torah translated as "law." But the translation is more accurately "teaching." So here's Jesus, teaching. And what astounds people is that he's teaching with authority. It's like the very Torah itself is being spoken alive in their midst! It's like they're hearing it fresh, for the very first time!

What happens there that Sabbath morning is both astounding and amazing. For those worshippers, the word of God is being spoken in their midst. "What's going on?" they say, "He's teaching with authority, not like our scribes do!"

Jesus and His disciples come into Capernaum, and it is likely Friday, because the Sabbath comes immediately at sunset on Friday, and one could not travel on the Sabbath. They're in the synagogue, and Jesus is teaching, but His teaching was different. Our text says, he taught "as one having authority, and not as the scribes." To get the picture, we need to know how the scribes taught. They would teach from the scriptures, and they would be careful to say, "Moses says this," or "the Prophet such and such, wrote that." Sometimes they might refer to what another scribe or rabbi, a famous and respected one, often deceased, had said about a passage. But they would never say it themselves. For they themselves had no authority. They had no "say-so."

While he was teaching, this man act outs. He is the one possessed of an unclean spirit. He was in their synagogue. We don't know here if Mark is only telling us that this man happened to be inside the synagogue at the time, or whether he was a member of the synagogue. I tend to believe that he was a member of the synagogue, as only Jews could be inside, so unless he had traveled and was visiting, as Jesus was, he lived in Capernaum and was a member.

It is okay that we don't know exactly whether it was place or people, but what it does tell us, is this: we cannot escape evil by where we go or the kind of place where we are. Evil is everywhere. We can't escape it by being religious, by the kind of people we are. Evil comes to all people. That was so then. It is true today. You know that you cannot physically run away from evil.

The unclean spirit in this man knows the truth of Jesus. His knowledge is not limited to the physical sense. "I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Just as the people sense that Jesus had authority, this spirit knows it, too. "Have you come to destroy us now?" The spirit knows that Jesus has that power and authority, and was afraid. We know this, or should know it, too. How does Luther's explanation to each of the commandments begin, "We should fear and love God..."

Now Jesus speaks. "Be silent, and come out of him." And so the spirit does. Christ's words get action. He not only states a truth, but His word brings about what He says. He has the "say-so." He says it, and it is so. And again the people are amazed. Listen carefully to what they say. "Such teaching with authority, even the demons obey Him."

When we participate in Holy Communion, we receive Christ's body and blood? Not because of the words or actions of the pastor, but by Christ's Words, by His "say-so." He says 'This is My Body,' and it is so; 'This is my blood' and it is so. How is it that our sins are forgiven? By Christ's say-so. He said, "Whosoever sins you forgive, they are forgiven them." And it is. What does the absolution declare? "As a servant of Christ, and by His authority I forgive you all your sins." Jesus says it, and it is so.

Christ has cleansed us from sin. And His say-so brings us forgiveness in absolution and in the communion. But Christ has not only paid the debt of our sins, and opened the gates of heaven, Christ is also victorious over the adversary, the devil.

Jesus is teaching them as one with authority. He's speaking like these teachings are His words. He's not just reflecting on the holy scriptures; He owns them.

And then comes the real jaw dropper. There's a certain man in the synagogue that day. He has an unclean spirit. Something destructive possesses him. When he sees Jesus, that is, when the unclean spirit sees Jesus, he knows exactly who Jesus is. And he's not a bit happy to see him.

In the latest issue of 'Christ in Our Home,' the writer of the comments on today's Gospel says: Jesus saw a man, a child of God who was suffering and in need of relief. Jesus possessed not only the power but the compassionate desire to heal him, to return the man to himself as created by God.

Jesus calls us to see this way; a person rather than a diagnosis, with compassion rather than self-serving curiosity, especially for those called unclean and pushed to

the margins. In seeing with Christlike eyes, we participate in the healing power of Jesus for the sake of the world in need. Our prayer should be; Teach us, O God, to see as you see, thru eyes of compassion and love, for Jesus' sake.

**Amen.**



# *“JESUS EVERYONE IS LOOKING FOR YOU”*

Message for the Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

From Pastor Norman Staker

February 4, 2024

ISAIAH 40: 21-31 — 1 CORINTHIANS 9: 16-23 — MARK 1: 29-39

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS  
RISEN INDEED!!

**A** pastor was preparing to leave the congregation where he had served faithfully for several years. Both he and his parishioners were in tears over his leaving. Gifts were given; embraces shared; kind and complimentary words offered: Pastor, we thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your service to the Lord here; Pastor, your faithfulness has been an inspiration to us; Pastor, God has truly blessed us with your ministry. But of all the gracious and kind comments made, the most moving, the most impressive was this: ‘Pastor, we knew that no matter how bad things were, no matter how difficult things became, if you were present, somehow it would be all right.’ No pastor could hear anything more uplifting and more affirming than this. ‘Pastor, we knew that no matter how bad things were, no matter how difficult things became, if you were present, somehow it would be all right.’ What if I told you that was actually me imagining the reaction I’d get when I leave here! I know, quit dreaming and get back to reality!

Multiply that sense of reassuring presence, if you will, a hundred-fold and it begins to convey something of the assurance that those who were sick or poor or broken by life must have felt in the presence of the Good Pastor, Jesus Christ. When Jesus was around, these people just knew that things would be all right, that healing would happen.

Life comes to life in the presence of God. Elijah breathing life into a dead boy’s body; Isaiah telling us to wait upon the Lord for renewal of strength; Paul doing whatever it takes to elicit the life-giving blessings of the gospel in the churchgoers of Corinth and Jesus healing the sick and broken. Again and again, the message is

the same, wherever God is, wherever Jesus is, life comes to life, things will be all right.

Those life-giving blessings of Jesus' touch are not limited to the narrow band of men and women who knew him in the flesh 2000 years ago. We don't have to celebrate from afar. Look within. We too have joined the ranks of those first men and women who were touched by Jesus and given new life, maybe not from physical restoration from infirmity but it surely has come through spiritual restoration from sin.

Our text tells us: "As soon as Jesus and the disciples left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever and they told him about her at once."

Our Gospel reading says they came into the house of Simon and Andrew, where Simon's mother-in-law was lying sick with a fever. The disciples immediately spoke to Jesus about her and Jesus took action! We need to understand this was no ordinary simple fever but a very serious high grade, life threatening, fever. Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up, a reference to his resurrection; Jesus took her by the hand and lifted her up and BAM! I know, Emeril Lagasse, right! But this is better than Emeril Lagasse. Bam, the fever left her and instead of taking it easy and resting, she began to serve them, them! The fever was gone.

Now, this is where things get really interesting. Right after Jesus goes to Peter's house and heals his mother-in-law, suddenly every neighbor with a headache shows up at their front door to be healed! Verses 32-33 say "That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases." Imagine that doctor's office waiting room!

The whole city was at the door! I did a little research on Google; in Jesus' time, Capernaum had a population of around 1500, that's one thousand five hundred people and they were all there to be healed. Talk about doctors making money! "The whole city, folks! Everyone was there; again emphasizing how many, 1500, the whole city. Is there enough Tylenol there to even think about taking two and calling in the morning? The whole city!

Word travels fast! And this was before email and telephones and cell phones, yes and even before the U.S. Postal Service! There was no video conferencing; no UPS or FedEx, just good old-fashioned word of mouth traveling by sandal-clad people all around the town.

And Jesus was kind and gracious to them. Unlike some doctors who might have asked, “how much is it worth to you,” or charging you some exorbitant amount depending on your insurance or lack of, Jesus did not expect payment. He simply healed them and cast out many demons as well. If I was around when Jesus was doing all this healing, I would have sent him my 6th grade teacher because I am sure she was demon-possessed. Yes, I would have gotten on the ‘Jesus healing for free’ bandwagon back then, as would we all. We would have all been thankful for whatever healing Jesus provided but would that have been the only reason we would have gone to Jesus?

That thought, that thought, gave me pause to ask what was it really that brought them to Jesus? I looked for something more than just physical ailments. However upon further study, I found that it was just their physical needs; or the physical needs of someone they loved, that motivated them. Jesus suddenly had something that they all wanted.

Got a hangnail, go see Jesus. Got a migraine, go to Jesus! Got a sore back, go to Jesus! Got a sore throat, go see Jesus! Got a nasty disease, go to Jesus! Got a demon, go to Jesus! How simple is that!? Who wouldn’t want to go!? In fact, if Jesus came here today and stood at the door of Bethel Lutheran offering to heal, this place would be jumping. But would it be jumping for the right reasons?

So, we see that Jesus endured this endless supply of want from his people. He dealt with them all night. It says that that evening “He healed many who were sick with various diseases and cast out many demons.” But now we need to answer the question I put to you earlier....that is...”should there be more?” Jesus did have a hidden agenda; a deeper meaning if you will for doing what he did. If not, he would never have felt a need to go on the cross. If healing people of their illnesses was all that mattered, he would have just stuck around and opened up a clinic.

Of course, on the surface, He did heal them because Jesus is compassionate, He is merciful. Jesus doesn’t like to see anyone suffer! But just looking at how many people came to see Jesus, you’ve got to see that there is something wrong. There is some sort of epidemic going on. People are sick. People are hurting. People are dealing with demon possession, just like my sixth grade teacher. Even here in our congregation, we all have our aches and pains. In fact last Sunday while I shared God’s message with you, if, I said if, if I had a fever of 102 and Jesus was around doing his healing thing, I would have cut my sermon short and gone to see him!

But, all of us are hurting and that should tell us something. It should tell us that something is wrong; something is deathly wrong.

There is an overabundance of sin in this world! That is what is wrong. The demon-possessed and the disease-ridden are showing us symptoms of a deeper and larger problem.

What would you say if I was your doctor and we just found out that you have cancer, and my response and action to you was to put a band aid on you before sending you on your way? Would you think I was a quack? I would hope so! Well that is what is going on as Jesus heals these physical problems. He is putting a band aid on something that requires greater attention. Yet in this case nobody realizes there is some greater illness that is still eating away at them. They could walk around with no demon or no leprosy, or even fever, but they were still sick. Jesus could have cured their cancer but they were still sick. Jesus had only eliminated a few of the symptoms. The sickness went deeper than leprosy or even demon-possession. I can't say it enough times...something still remained. Something very, very, very bad still lingered.

Jesus had a deeper reason for healing them. He wanted them to know who He was; He wanted them to trust His Words. He wanted them to start getting the idea that it was Him! He was indeed the promised Messiah; the one the prophets of old had been talking about since the days of Moses! God had come in the flesh! Immanuel! "God with us" is here, standing right in front of you! Here to forgive the sins of the world, to heal us from what was most important; sin.

Casting out demons and healing diseases was a means to an end. And that end was for them to believe! The idea was that if He could get this first generation of New Testament people to believe, then grandiose healings and demonic exorcisms would no longer be as necessary. Remember, these were not just faith healings by some quack evangelist for TV ratings or to increase his or her financial holdings! These were actual healings.

People would simply thrive on and trust in His Words. People would not live to be healed of physical things, but of deeper spiritual things. In other words, they would realize that His kingdom was not of this world, but of another.

One of the best places Christ ever showed this intention is found in Mark chapter 2. It was the account of when four guys brought their crippled friend for Christ to heal. You remember that story. Jesus was preaching in a house, beneath a thatched

roof. And it was so crowded, that these four men, carrying their friend on a makeshift cot, had to climb the stairs outside up to the roof, dragging their friend along, and then dig a hole large enough to let their friend down into the middle of the room where Jesus was preaching.

Jesus was very moved by their love for their friend, but even more so by their faith in Him. So you know what He does? Not what you'd expect; not what Hollywood would have done with this scene. Hollywood would have Jesus be so touched by the diligence of these friends that He would heal this man very dramatically, and everyone would all watch him stand up and dance out of the house. That would make a great show, wouldn't it?

But no, Jesus was so moved by the love and faith of these friends that He decided to give the greatest gift He could ever give this crippled man. Everyone thought it would be physical healing; that need was so obvious. But Jesus knows that all physical disease and pain is in this world solely because sin is in this world. So if physical pain should remind us of anything, it shouldn't be physical need; it should be spiritual need. Physical troubles should drive us to be healed spiritually. When we suffer physically, we should be begging for the Lord's Supper. When we suffer emotionally, we should be pleading for absolution. For these physical things should remind us of nothing other than we carry the sin-gene and live in a sin-world.

No one would ever experience physical ailments if it weren't for sin. So what does Jesus do? He gives this crippled man the very best gift God has to offer; higher than even the gift of miraculous physical healing; he gives him forgiveness of sin. Jesus turns his attention from the beloved faith of his four friends, looks directly at the crippled man, and says, 'Child, your sins are forgiven.'

And you know what the average person would say? "Yea, thanks a lot, now could you do something about my legs?" That was the mentality of the crowds that day at Simon Peter's house. "Heal me, Jesus! No, Heal me, Jesus!" And to His credit, He did. But it was also important for them to learn the lesson he would later teach this crippled man and his friends. True healing goes much deeper than physical paralysis, or the sores of leprosy, or cancerous cells, or even demon possession. True healing isn't a temporal fix, but an eternal gift.

So, after a long night of healing and exorcisms, Jesus gets up early in the morning, before anyone else is awake, and while it is still dark, He goes out alone to pray. How many of us do that? We are not given the contents of that prayer, but we are

told what was on Jesus' mind shortly thereafter. He wanted to get on with His preaching! When Peter finally found Him, that's what Jesus said: "Let's go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came.

We can't blame anyone who went to Jesus simply to be healed; you and I would do the same thing. What a blessing it must have been to be the beneficiary of the new life God brings through Jesus Christ.

Christ is restoring His whole creation, including those in your home, in your daily lives. Christ comes to us. He cares about our ordinary everyday lives. He restores us to wholeness of both soul and body. He does this by His Word. He does it by lifting us up. Out of our illness of sin, and all its effects. He does this to us, for us, in us, and through us. He restores us and those around us, right where we live.

**AMEN!!**

# “DENALI FAITH”

Message for the “*Transfiguration of Our Lord*” Sunday

From Pastor Norman Staker

February 11, 2024

2 KINGS 2: 1-12 — 2 CORINTHIANS 4: 3-6 — MARK 9: 2-9

GRACE, MERCY, AND PEACE FROM GOD OUR FATHER AND FROM  
OUR LORD AND SAVIOR JESUS CHRIST. AMEN. HE IS RISEN; HE IS  
RISEN INDEED!!

**J**esus gained popularity as a healer but He wanted to provide more. Even the greatest healing miracle was only a band-aid compared to what Jesus really wanted to offer.

I don't think that you are going to be surprised that I am now going to mention Super Bowl 58 this morning and the fact that two teams, neither of which I'm favoring, the Kansas City Chiefs and the San Francisco 49ers, will be playing! Both teams have been there before and they last played each other in Super Bowl 54 in 2019 which was won by the Chiefs. Although watching it on television is enjoyable, I would have loved to be there in person. I know it is next to impossible to obtain Super Bowl tickets unless you are either very rich or you personally know one of the players; I heard tickets ranged from the cheapest seat at close to \$8000 to the best in the house at \$85000!!.

Prior to the game, there were a number of interviews by players on both sides talking about how many cousins, relatives and long lost friends rose up to congratulate them on making it to the Super Bowl. After the congratulations of course, these “cousins” whom the players never knew they had, wanted tickets to the game. The phone rings off the hook. “Patrick, yea, it's your cousin Hector. Yeah, I am your fifth cousin, twice removed, from your step mother's side of the family. Yeah, don't you remember? I played hopscotch with you once when we were kids. Yea, those were the good ol' days, weren't they? By the way, I hear you have some extra tickets to the big game!”

It is quite comical to hear these stories from professional players. Here it is, the biggest game of their life and suddenly every Tom, Dick and Harry calls them up to see if they can grab a little piece of the pie, so to speak. One player even suggested that these “relatives” were bold enough to come to his house, just to “chat.” Right; that’s the ticket. They came over just to “chat!” Yes, if you’ve suddenly got Super Bowl tickets, you’re suddenly popular. And before you know it; you have a larger family or group of friends to boot! It’s the same for those who’ve won the Lottery; one doesn’t know just how many relatives they suddenly have!!

Well, for Jesus, it obviously wasn’t Super Bowl tickets that brought people out of the woodwork, (although if Jesus was teaching in 2024, that would not have been a bad idea), nor was it money, no, it was His healing powers, which was even better than tickets; even better than money.

Verses 2-3 tell us: ‘And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them.’

It happens every year at this time, right before Ash Wednesday and Lent begin. We have the Transfiguration of Our Lord Sunday. There’s a word you don’t hear every day, transfiguration! In fact, other than one day out of the church year, you might not otherwise hear it. The Oxford dictionary defines the word “Transfiguration” as “a complete change of form or appearance into a more beautiful or spiritual state” and even gives Christ’s appearance in radiant glory to three of his disciples as an example. Needless to say, it’s not something you see happen in your everyday life. But one day a year, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, is set aside to talk about a Transfiguration that happened 2000 years ago. As we do, you’ll see something glorious happen, but we’ll discover the transfiguration isn’t so much about what those disciples saw, but what they heard, that they were to take from that mountaintop that day.

What a time it was for Peter, James, and John. Here they are, Jesus “inner circle” of disciples, headed up a mountain with Jesus. As far as why they’re going up, we don’t know. One of the characteristics of Mark’s gospel is that he doesn’t add in a whole lot of detail and I think we’ve seen that already; Mark tends to get right to the point of what happens. Jesus, and these three disciples are up on this mountain alone, and then, it happens! One moment, Jesus looks like he always had to the disciples, like one of them, flesh and blood. The next thing they know, Jesus is transfigured, his clothes becoming “dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.” Matthew’s gospel tells us Jesus face was shining



brighter than the sun. Now this had to have been impressive enough, to see this bright white light coming from Jesus Himself who is called the Light of the Word.

I remember my recent trip to Alaska in August. There were many different highlights but I think the biggest and most impressive one was the trip to Mount Denali and Denali National Park. My sister in law, Toni, and I had stopped along the way at one of those scenic lookout vistas, you know, where you can stop and take good clear pictures of the subject matter but Mt Denali was in the distance and its peak was shrouded in fog and clouds. You couldn't see it even with binoculars. A little later we stopped at a souvenir shop and being a ball cap souvenir collector, I was looking at all the different designs on those caps but a couple stood out; they asked the question 'are you a member of the 30% club?' or 'I'm a member of the 30% club.' Naturally my curiosity was up so I asked someone what that meant. You were a member of the club, at no cost, other than being able to get a clear view of the peak of Mount Denali, which, because of the fog and clouds, only about 30% of travelers ever got to see it. Needless to say, I was a member of the 70% club! Which doesn't exist actually but neither one of us got to see its peak!! No I didn't buy one of the 30% club hats either! We were hoping to see it but we did not.

That being said, there's more to Jesus and his three friends being on the mountain that Mark in his gospel refers to. Remember, up to this point, the only people on that mountain were Jesus, Peter, James, and John. Now, out of nowhere, Elijah and Moses appear. The last time anyone on earth had seen Elijah was recorded in our Old Testament reading for this morning in 2 Kings 2. 'Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.' Elijah and Elisha are walking together and talking one moment; did you catch their destination, Bethel! Elijah wanted Elisha to stay put, that he was going on to Bethel, but Elisha wouldn't hear of it; he was going to Bethel with Elijah. "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you. So they went to Bethel." At this point, some prophets who were in Bethel at the time told Elisha, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you? And he said, Yes I know; keep silent."

Elisha refuses to leave Elijah. 'As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you.' So the two continue walking until a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah is taken up into heaven. We're told Elisha kept watching and crying out, Father, father! When he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. Can you see a reference to the day of Jesus' crucifixion, the temple curtain was torn in two?

Out of nowhere, Moses and Elijah, representing the law and the prophets, the Old Testament scriptures, are there with Jesus on that mountain, talking with him. Now if I were in Peter, James, or John's shoes that day, I'd be a bit confused by everything that's going on here, especially if I was Peter, especially in light of what had happened just a few days earlier.

Just to refresh your memories, six days earlier, just after Peter had answered Jesus' question of "who do you say that I am?" with the bold confession "You are the Christ," Jesus "began to teach (the disciples) that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again." Peter didn't want to hear any of this talk, I'm not so sure I would have either; he pulls Jesus aside and starts to rebuke Jesus, saying "This won't happen to you. This isn't the Messiah I was looking for. Messiahs don't suffer and die, they bring victory and glory to us. So Jesus, this talk about dying and suffering, it ain't gonna happen to you, not if I have anything to say about it." But Jesus replied "Get behind me, Satan, You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Ouch! Talk about being put in your place.

I wonder if Peter was still smarting from that rebuke as he sees all of this stuff unfold right before his very eyes. He sees this grand and glorious event take place, the light radiating from Jesus, Moses and Elijah's presence there, and he thinks "Boy, it doesn't get any better than this. Now this is what I was talking about the other day, Jesus!"

Out of a desire to keep that glory there as long as he can, he says "It is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters-one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." Mark adds in the comment that Peter didn't know what to say; they were so frightened. Of course they had to be frightened. They're getting a small glimpse of the glory of God himself, right there on that mountain. Whatever is going on up there on that mountaintop that day, it's something that Peter wants to have last as long as possible. Maybe he thinks that by his work of setting up shelters, he can persuade Moses and Elijah to stay with Jesus for a while so that he can keep this glorious activity going. Maybe Peter thinks that he'd better do something to make sure this experience doesn't end. Maybe Peter thinks that this is his chance to keep Jesus from suffering and dying. This is a Kodak moment and Peter wants all the pictures he can get and video too!

But then, a cloud appears and envelopes the scene. The same kind of cloud that covered Mt. Sinai when Moses went up to receive the 10 commandments. The

same kind of cloud that led the Israelites out of Egypt. The same kind of cloud that hid Mt Denali's peak from us that day. The same kind of cloud that represented the presence of God himself, was there on that mountain. So it's no doubt where the source of the voice is that comes out of that cloud; it's the voice of God himself. If I'm Peter, James, or John, I'm listening to what that voice is going to tell me. And what is it that the voice says? Does it say "Great idea, Peter, get to work setting up those shelters, and James, you bring Moses, Elijah, and Jesus some food, they're hungry, and John, you better go and make sure that they have some nice clean sheets for their beds, and that they have everything else they need to be comfortable here. And because the three of you did such a wonderful job setting the right atmosphere for this, you'll be blessed beyond your wildest dreams?" No. The voice didn't direct the disciples to what their eyes were seeing, the voice told them, "This is my beloved Son; Listen to him." The voice directed them to the words Jesus had been speaking to them all along. Not the miracles, not the glory of the transfiguration, but Jesus' word.

"Listen to him." Strange words considering. What are they to be listening to? Well, what's Jesus talking about with Moses and Elijah up there on that mountain? Are they talking about ways that Peter, James, and John can live their best lives now in this world? Are they talking about how if Peter, James, and John serve Jesus well enough, then they will be blessed with material wealth, power, and prestige? Are they talking about Jesus setting up a kingdom of worldly power and glory? No. Luke's Gospel gives us the answer when he says "They spoke about (Jesus') departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem." We're right back to what Jesus had been talking about with His disciples six days earlier. Remember that conversation, Peter? Remember what Jesus said and how you responded to it? Remember why Jesus called you Satan? It's being confirmed right here.

And then, just as soon as God the Father had instructed those disciples on that mountaintop to "Listen to Him," He was gone. Moses and Elijah had disappeared. Jesus' appearance was back to what it was before. No more light. No more cloud. No more loud, booming voice from heaven. Just Jesus, Peter, James, and John, making their way down the mountain, and eventually to Jerusalem, where Jesus will suffer, and die, just as He had talked about on that mountain.

Follow God's command on that Mountain to "Listen to Him," as you hear what Jesus has done for you on the cross, how Jesus takes all your sins with him to the cross.

Remember the transfiguration, as Peter, James, and John did, not in terms of worldly glory, but with the reminder of the voice “Listen to Him,” listen to Jesus this day tell you that you are forgiven of all of your sin. Listen to Jesus call you His own. Listen to Jesus on your last day deliver you out of this life of tears, pain, and suffering, and into the eternal glory of paradise. ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!’ Each day when you pray, say to God, “Lord, I am listening. What do you want to tell me?”

Amen.