

Sundays of Epiphany 2025 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. 12 – “Tough Words Good
News”*

Second Sunday After – Jan. 19 – “Got Wine?”

Third Sunday After – Jan. 26 – “Can We Be One With Christ?”

Fourth Sunday After – Feb. 2 – “Simeon’s Story Is Our Story”

Fifth Sunday After – Feb. 9 – “Jesus Came In And Sat Down”

*Sixth Sunday After – Feb. 16 – “Are You On God’s
A-List Or His Blacklist”*

*Seventh Sunday After – Feb. 23 – “Love Your Enemies –
So Easy To Say”*

*Transfiguration Of Our Lord – Mar. 2 – “The Transfiguration
of Our Lord”*

“TOUGH WORDS GOOD NEWS”

Message for *The Baptism Of Our Lord* Sunday

From Pastor Norman Staker

January 12, 2025

SAIAH 43: 1-7 * ACTS 8: 14-17 * LUKE 3: 15-17, 21-22

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

This morning's sermon is going to be a little different as we celebrate the Baptism of Christ. I say a little different because as we look at Jesus' Baptism, and by way of that, our own baptism and what it means to us, we'll find that each of our Bible lessons (Isaiah and Acts, and of course, the Gospel from Luke) has very important things to teach us and tell us. But don't worry; I'm only doing one sermon and not three! The theme that unites all these passages is going to be found in the first verse of the Isaiah reading: "I have called you by name; you are mine."

Our Gospel lesson from Luke's 3rd chapter captures the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. We last saw him at the age of 12, a couple of weeks ago, just a week prior, he was a baby born in a stable. They grow up so fast, don't they? Now he is 30. Eighteen years have passed. Emperor Tiberius has been in power for fifteen years. Pontius Pilate is governor of Judea, and Herod, son of Herod the Great, who tried to kill Jesus at birth, rules Galilee. For the Jews, Annas and Caiaphas are the high priests.

And John the Baptizer, the man who announced Jesus' coming, was a strange character who ate locusts and honey and preached vigorously about the coming Messiah. There had not been a prophet for 400 years in Israel, and though John the Baptist was recognized as a prophet, others wondered if he himself was the Messiah. He stirred the expectations of his listeners, from soldier to civilian, and raised the ire of politicians, most notably Herod, who had him jailed. John had paved the way for Jesus' coming on the scene by raising awareness of the need to turn from sin and to turn to God. He preached this message in a manner that was immediate and urgent. One could evidently feel the pace of reality speeding up to a

climactic moment, for people were coming to repent. And then it comes. History and prophecy meet as Jesus arrives.

Can you imagine being in the crowd when the revelation of Jesus' presence comes to pass? It must have been an amazing thing to behold. The Bible doesn't record the reactions of the people, but one can imagine the scene as the Spirit descended upon Jesus. "Here he is, the man who is God. The Messiah has come! He's actually here!"

And here's Jesus, a 30 year old man, perhaps handsome and rugged from his work as a carpenter. He was about to create a beautiful moment, a powerful moment in history. Thirty was the accepted right age to begin one's important work. David was thirty when he became king. Joseph was thirty when he began serving the king of Egypt. Jesus, acting within the mores of the culture, would turn society upside down, from the inside out.

Before we get too far into the history of Jesus and his Baptism, you may be asking, "What do the verses that have been read have to do with Baptism?" These verses are important because they help us understand something very fundamental, even foundational to any talk of what Baptism is, and means, and does. And that boils down to one very important word: Relationship.

The truth is that God takes his relationship with his people very seriously; he always has. In fact, he created this universe, and galaxy, and solar system, and planet, and all the plants, and animals, the sun, the moon, the stars, the oceans, and every plain and valley, because of his love for you, and his desire to have a relationship with you. Think about that. None of this is an accident. You are no accident, or some lucky roll of the evolutionary dice. You were created by a creator. You were knit together in your mother's womb as Psalm 139 says. And God wants to know you, to have you know him, to be in relationship with one another.

These verses from Isaiah are so amazing because God wants his people all the way back in Isaiah's day to know this, and to be reminded of this. And not because they have been so wonderfully awesome and Godly, not at all! God wants them to know how much he loves them right in the middle of their worst hour. In the chapter right before our reading, God has Isaiah speak to the spiritual deafness and blindness of his people, and how they have openly, and brashly sinned against God.

But then he immediately has these words for them: “But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel; “Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.”

What God is saying is, ‘I know what you’ve done, I know your sin, I know you’ve turned from me, but I STILL claim you as my own. I STILL proudly tell the world that it is I who created you, and formed you. EVEN NOW I want you to know that I redeemed you and saved you. EVEN NOW I have called you by name, and know who you are; YOU ARE MINE.’

Do you see what I mean when I say that God takes his relationship with you so seriously? And God’s love isn’t like any other kind of love. His relationship, his love for you isn’t something that comes and goes, or rises and falls. His love for you is like the relentless waves of the ocean, that day after day, hour after hour, come crashing down on shore as they have since God created the oceans, and will until he takes you home.

Relationship with God is something you have because of God’s love for you. It’s what you have because of Christ’s death to pay for your sins. It’s what you have because Christ rose from the dead never to die again, and to open to you the way of eternal life. If you think, not of your best day, but of the day, of the moment, when you were most ashamed, where you felt the heaviest weight of sin, where you felt more lost than you ever had. It is in this exact moment when God said to you, and says to you, what he said to his people so many years ago. “You are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you... Fear not, for I am with you.”

When we begin to understand how seriously God takes his relationship with us, we begin to understand how important baptism is, and the blessings that God gives us in our baptism are. Over the history of Christianity, there have been many instances where people have lost sight of what is really important about Baptism, and have argued or focused too much on details, or myths, or human opinions.

For a number of years, many people saw baptism not as being about a relationship or repentance and forgiveness with God, but rather a simple act that was only meant to cover sins committed before a person was baptized. If that is your belief, when would be the best time to get baptized? That’s right, just before you die. What’s the problem with that? Also right, we don’t know exactly when that is going to be a lot of times! There have been controversies over whether people

sprinkle water, or dunk in water. Others focus too much on the idea of people making a commitment to God in baptism, and not enough on the commitment that God makes to us.

This isn't a casual relationship, or mere acquaintance with God! God says in Baptism we are baptized, made a part of his death for sins, and his resurrection from the dead to life eternal. God actually gives us a newness of life! He gives us hope in place of our hopelessness, forgiveness and holiness in the place of our sin, and the fullness of life in the place of eternal death.

In short, your baptism is an amazing gift, and one that you should not take for granted. It is a gift that means as much to you, and your faith, and your life today as it did the day you were baptized, and it will mean that much to you for all eternity. Your baptism was never about what you did for God, but rather all about what Christ has done, for you. It has always been about Christ's death on the cross, his resurrection from the dead, and his unrelenting love for you.

The question has been asked, "Can a person be saved without baptism?" The answer is, "yes." If you look at the thief on the cross, he repented of his sins, and asked for Jesus' mercy, and what did Jesus say? "Today you will be with me in Paradise." That wasn't just a figure of speech; Jesus said today and meant today, like we would when we said we were going to church today.

Jesus shows us many things in the way he begins his ministry. First, he chooses to begin his ministry in the company of those who have come to repent. This is fortunate, to say the least, for Jesus comes to all who repent even as he calls the world to repentance. He does not go to where he might have gained instant status in the eyes of the prominent religious leaders. He started out humbly, being born in a manger to humble parents, and he continues that pattern, beginning his ministry without fanfare among those who have come to humble themselves.

Second, Jesus chooses to begin his ministry at a site of water. He did not choose a site filled with the trappings of a king. No, this king begins at a humble place of cleansing, the Jordan River. Water is available to all, as is Jesus. It is a prime sustainer of life, even as the salvation he comes to bring is the prime ingredient for everlasting life with God.

Third, Jesus affirms baptism as a powerful symbol to express the human desire to be cleansed from sin. Jesus, in allowing John to baptize him, identifies with humanity, with our sin. He models submission. If Jesus can, then so can we. That

is the message. Jesus doesn't need baptism, but understands the powerful bonding it expresses to those watching; and to those who would hear about it.

So, I think it is rather fitting that Jesus chooses to go into the water, to get wet. For it is a powerful testimony of his willingness to go in with us, to join us and be right there with us in our need for spiritual renewal and transformation. He commits to us, choosing to be with us as opposed to being over us as other religious leaders of the day. Jesus is not watching from the sidelines or rooting us on from an elevated position that tempts arrogance and haughtiness. Jesus is proving his willingness to humble himself for our benefit, though He would know no sin. In his baptism, Jesus models what we all must do.

At the start of our Gospel reading, we met up with John the Baptist preaching about the coming Messiah, and proclaiming how worthy, and powerful the Messiah will be, and then we learn that Jesus the Messiah has arrived on the scene and has come to be baptized Himself by John. Luke's account is short and sweet, but moving and powerful nonetheless: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

What we see happening is that Jesus, at a specific time, and a specific point in history is marking the beginning of his mission. He is marking the starting point of his ministry to the world to be the Savior of the world, the hope of the lost, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And what he is doing is connecting his baptism, his life, his death, to all the baptisms that had taken place at John's hand, and all the baptisms that would take place in all of time, yours and mine included.

And the great gift of witnessing Jesus' baptism through Luke's Gospel, is that once again you see how important God's relationship is with you. All three persons of the Holy Trinity are present in one place at one time, and what does the Father say, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." It is a miracle!

But what happened in your baptism is no less a miracle by any means. Your baptism was filled with Jesus and connected you to him, Your baptism was filled with the Holy Spirit and marked the start of his work in your life, your baptism was witnessed by your Heavenly Father, the creator of heaven and earth, who smiled and said of you, exactly what he said of Jesus, "You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased."

One great gift about your baptism was that it happened. It really happened, in a real place, at a real point in history, with real water, and the real Word of God. And I think God designed baptism this way, because he knew that we would need this assurance sometimes. Sometimes we have doubts, sometimes we come to church and hear about God's forgiveness, and his grace, and we wonder, "can it really be for me?"

After his baptism, four things happened: Jesus prayed, the heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in bodily form like a dove, and the voice of God came from heaven. In human terms, he was wet, drenched in the human condition; his heart was open, allowing him to commit to the task; he received power, to carry out his mission; and the voice of God came from heaven, to signal Jesus' readiness to speak to the world. And Jesus did, and Jesus still does. Are you listening?

AMEN!!

“GOT WINE?”

Message for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

From Pastor Norman Staker

January 19, 2025

ISAIAH 62: 1-5 * 1 CORINTHIANS 12: 1-11 * JOHN 2: 1-11

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

Have you ever wondered how the stories recorded in the Gospels came to be selected out of the many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of the events in the earthly life of Jesus? The Gospel of John includes 7 of Jesus' 35 recorded miracles, less than any other Gospel, yet this miracle is not recorded in any of the Synoptic gospels. Why? The fact that John included it in his seven makes it seem important, but the fact that the other three gospel writers overlooked it makes it seem less significant.

You and I are apt to have some difficulty with today's Gospel, Jesus at the wedding at Cana miraculously turning water into wine. John says this was the first of Jesus' signs. Signs of what?

I think the reason we are apt to have trouble with this story, not because we are so modern and sophisticated or even scientific but because we are so careful, so cautious, even restrained. We don't make big moves in life. We don't ask big things of God. We keep our faith to ourselves, safely tucked away in the confines of our church. We keep our prayers chastened, cautious, and careful. Maybe that's because we think of our relationship with God as a matter of what we feel, what we believe, or what we do. We have our limits.

Is it a good thing or a bad thing that John's gospel is different? The other three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called "synoptics" because you can lay them down beside one another and you basically have the same material. Sure, each has its distinguishing characteristics and is written from a definite point of view, but by and large each is substantially the same or at least similar to the others. Not so with John's gospel. It has a different agenda that John identifies in

the book's conclusion. He wrote: "but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name." This gospel is written with a significant purpose. That the reader may believe and continue to believe that Jesus is the Christ, God's son and that believing will result in new life.

In all likelihood John was the longest living disciple of Jesus and had ample time to reflect on the significance of the public ministry of Jesus. A characteristic of John's Gospel is his inclusion of seven 'signs.' Jesus' key miracles are consistently called 'signs' in the Gospel of John. They may certainly reveal something about Jesus, but they are not intended to call attention to Jesus but to God, his source of power. 'Signs' may or may not be attractive and interesting to look at, but they are not in any case ends in themselves; signs point to something beyond themselves. When my family would go on vacation, I remember as a child watching for those Burma Shave signs on the side of the road: No matter / How you slice it / It's still your face / Be humane / Use / Burma-Shave

Past / Schoolhouses / Take it slow / Let the little / Shavers grow / Burma-Shave

If you dislike / Big traffic fines / Slow down / Till you / Can read these signs / Burma-Shave

1963 was the last year for the signs, most of which were repeats, including the final slogan, which had first appeared in 1953: Our fortune / Is your / Shaven face / It's our best / Advertising space / Burma-Shave

The signs or wonders by Jesus of providing help or healing to those in need revealed his glory to those who believed in him and so would "have life in his name."

John records these supernatural acts as historical events but also sees them as symbolic parables pointing beyond what happened to demonstrate how we can obtain the fullness of his blessing. God knows how slow of understanding we are, and don't be offended by that; He's God and we're not, so we are slow of understanding compared to God. So God has provided us with illustrations and examples to illuminate the message. John is fond of dropping hints, inviting us to see a deeper meaning in what we read.

The first of these signs and Jesus' first miracle is the changing of water into wine. This first miracle is history now, but has a wider significance in speaking to us of

the new wine of the Kingdom. It's an event that reveals who Jesus is and what he does.

'On the third day' there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. This is the third day after John the Baptist's role had been revealed and the first two male followers of Jesus, Andrew and Peter, had decided to take part in whatever it was Jesus was going to be about, mostly on the strength of John's recommendations. This 'third day', which, by the way, Jesus will later resuscitate Lazarus from death on the third day, Jesus is doing what he probably did regularly. He attended a wedding in Cana of Galilee. I haven't done a lot of weddings in my time here at Bethel but it's kinda funny that people past and present say that Jesus' presence at the wedding that day in Cana is proof of his endorsement of marriage, even though we have no indication that he himself was ever married. Sure, some have erroneously linked him to Mary Magdalene but he was never married to her or anyone else. He's attending this wedding, probably of someone in the family, maybe one of his own sisters; we get this hint because the servants in the story are given directions by Jesus' widowed, we don't really know, mother. And did you notice his mother does not have a name; nowhere in this gospel is she called Mary but only 'the mother of Jesus?' The mother of Jesus was there. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.' Jesus then addresses his own mother, not as mom, or Mother, or even Mary, as some people actually do address their mothers by her first name. No, Jesus calls her 'woman.'

"Woman, what concern is that to you and me?" Anyone here ever seriously addressed your mother as 'woman?'

Weddings are occasions when one hopes everything goes just right. The perfect day is planned long in advance, and the anticipation leads to a heightened sense of excitement. It is a special moment in the lives of the bride, the groom, and their families. Those in attendance share in the celebration as it reminds those who are married of their own wedding day and those who are single of the hope of marriage in the future.

But they had run out of wine. How does that happen? But when you consider that weddings in those days lasted a week or more compared to today's lasting maybe a few hours. Also, the whole town was invited and not to show up would have been an insult to the wedding party. It's possible that too many people showed up and liked their fruit flavored drink and not Kool-Aid so much that they just kept drinking. Maybe the family had underestimated just how much they would need; maybe they had a budget and tried to stick to that hoping it would all work out. It

can happen in the best of circles! This was a serious social error and would reflect poorly on the bridegroom. Lawsuits were not unknown in circumstances like that.

Mary appears to have had a leading catering role at the wedding. If you've ever been involved in the organization of a wedding, you know how demanding it can be! Imagine then how concerned she was when she learned from the head servant that the wine had run out. This was serious; the family would be in disgrace! She knew that if the dilemma became public, it would place the host family in an extremely embarrassing situation. But she tried to keep calm; don't panic, she told herself. Her mind went into overdrive thinking what could be done to retrieve the situation. Perhaps the servant could run out and buy a fresh supply from the local liquor store! No, there wasn't time and anyway the gap in providing refreshment would be noticed. But why was she worrying? There was no need to; it suddenly dawned on her that the answer was Jesus!

The solution to her problem had been present all the time. Of course! Jesus was here. Surely he would know what to do. After all, only three days previously his cousin John, now a popular prophet, had proclaimed Jesus to be of a higher rank than himself, and the one that Israel was waiting for! She remembered what the angel had said to her about the very special baby she was going to have: "So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." Here was a wonderful opportunity for him to disclose himself in the company of his relations and friends! That was Mary's strategy, but did Jesus agree?

Mary could smile again. "Don't worry," she advised the servant, "I'll tell my son, Jesus. He'll know what to do!" She had no doubt at all that this problem was well within his scope to deal with. Mary quickly found Jesus and simply said to him, "They have no more wine." They have no wine. The words can't be criticized but what matters is the way she says it: "Do something about it: you can, you must!" She stood waiting for him to solve the problem. It was then that she had the surprise of her life. Jesus spoke, gently but firmly, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." Mary was perplexed, perhaps even hurt. Why had Jesus addressed her as "Woman" instead of as "Mother?" She felt as if her own son was rebuking her. What had happened to their relationship? He had never acted unfairly, and he had never given her cause to believe that he didn't love her and respect her. Mary realized that Jesus now stood before her not just as her son but as a mature man.

"Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.'

And they filled them up to the brim.”

The servants weren't left to wonder what they should do. It was the last thing they would have thought of: "Fill the jars with water." There's nothing more ordinary than that! What a menial job! Mary may have expected some dramatic action. But no, this is our Lord's way. It's useless to expect any great blessing from God if we are disobedient to his will. It's so easy to fall into the temptation of wanting to do things our way.

I can imagine that the servants were puzzled at the strange command to fill the jars with water. The head waiter had to stir them into action, "You heard him; get on with it!" But the next command really baffled them: "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." This was the limit! It was bizarre! In fear and trepidation the servant dipped a pitcher into the stone jar now filled to the brim with water and carried it to the host. Wonder of wonders, the water had turned into a first class vintage; it was genuine wine! What had happened?

Incredible! But it had happened; there's no doubt about it. Jesus had turned water into real wine, and it was of the best quality; possibly Cabernet Sauvignon or Pinot Noir; I read that a person can't go wrong with the right Pinot Noir. Just for informational purposes, the most expensive wine in the world is the Domaine de la Romanee-Conti, Romanee-Conti Grand Cru 1945. If you have a bottle of that in your wine cabinet, you paid about \$558,000 for it! Again, just for informational purposes but Jesus could have easily changed that water into that wine! Easily. This was no theatrical trick! It wasn't a matter of putting some chemicals and coloring in the water to make it nice and tasty! This was a miracle, a supernatural action by God; an action which is above nature.

Sometimes people have the wrong idea about Jesus and about Christianity in general. Some people are offended by the notion that Jesus could actually be joyful, smile, laugh or even have a sense of humor. But John is telling us in our gospel today that Jesus could be joyful and celebrate the life and the joys of other people. John is reminding us once again that Jesus was a human being like us.

When the wine gave out, the water, set aside for ritual cleansing, became the new wine. In fact, it was the best wine! This is remarkable, Jesus turns social expectations completely around by saving the best for last. What Jesus has done at this wedding is a powerful analogy of his mission. He gave up his life on the cross, his blood poured out for our sins. But this was not the end of the story. It was the beginning of the greatest miracle in history. Jesus, the living water, was

resurrected by the power of God. And now, because of his transformation from God incarnate to risen Savior, we who believe in Christ are cleansed of our sins.

Let the celebration begin! Become intoxicated with the Living Water who became the new wine, who saved the best for last by providing the way to salvation with the miracle of his life, death, and resurrection.

Amen.

“CAN WE BE ONE WITH CHRIST?”

Message for the Third Sunday After Epiphany

From Paster Norman Staker

January 26, 2025

NEHEMIAH 8: 1-3, 5-6, 8-10 * 1 CORINTHIANS 12: 12-31A

LUKE 4: 14-21

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

I suspect that a number of you have heard the story of the young man who was desperately seeking God's guidance for some crucial issue in his life. For some reason he decided that the best way forward might be simply to allow his Bible to fall open randomly and then follow the wisdom of whatever verse his eyes first fell upon. I'd say we've all done that once or twice.

So he let his Bible fall open. And much to his alarm the verse staring up at him was Matthew 27:5, where he read these words: "And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself." Well that certainly didn't appeal to him, so he decided to try again. This time he came to Luke 10:37 – "You go, and do likewise." Well, he thought to himself, third time is a charm, so he rifled through the pages once more and what did his eyes land upon, but John 13:27 – "What you are going to do, do quickly."

I read about one wedding where the bride to be was very nervous so the pastor chose a verse that he hoped would diminish the fear. The verse was 1 John 4:18: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

The pastor thought it would be a nice gesture if the best man read the verse. Well, the best man was not a church goer, and did not know the difference between 1 John and the gospel of John. As instructed at the wedding, the best man introduced the reading by saying that the pastor felt this was an appropriate verse for Sue, the bride to be. However instead of reading 1 John 4:18, he read John 4:18 which reads....."You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband."

You don't have to laugh, but I just wanted to illustrate an expression that was drilled into me early in my Christian life by some of my fellow Christians. It goes like this: A text without a context is a pretext.

There are a number of clips from the Bible that have been misused because they have been quoted without any regard for the context in which they were originally written. You just heard a couple of them!

Can we be one with Christ? In case you hadn't noticed, there is an ambiguity, there's more than one interpretation, in the title of my message today. Most of you will take the title to ask whether we can be united with Christ. Can we be so identified with our Savior that we might be said to be one with Him?

But the way I want to read the question of the sermon title is this: Can we be alone with Christ? Can we be solitary Christians, having a personal relationship with Jesus but disregarding the community of the local church and the community of the broader church, the entire body of Christ? In other words, can we, in the company of Christ, be "do-it-yourself" Christians?

You recall our service on Christmas Eve; we read from Luke chapter 2, the familiar story where we celebrated the birth of our Lord with Mary and Joseph, the Shepherds, the Angels, the Wise Men, and don't forget the animals. Then, as you recall, the very next week, we started with the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. He was about his Father's business in the temple and he was already the ripe old age of 12. The following week, at the age of 30, aren't you glad we don't age that quickly, Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist. From this point on, we have an up-close view of Jesus.

Luke 4:14-15 says, "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, returned to Galilee and a report about him spread through the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone."

This is a different Jesus than we've seen so far. Out loud, influential, teaching everywhere, being praised. His mission as the Messiah is firmly in mind as he begins his public ministry.

Then Luke tells us that Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth. It was his custom to go to synagogue on the Sabbath day.

It's a dramatic scene, the boy of Mary and Joseph, after some time out and away from Nazareth, comes home, shows up at synagogue, and is asked to be a reader at the Sabbath service. He gets the scroll of Third Isaiah and takes some time in the big scroll finding his place. Can you imagine, getting this huge scroll and being asked to look up a certain Old Testament reading; many of us can't do that in our Bibles, and some of those even have those tabs with the different books on them to make it even easier. Probably not too many carpenters could read on top of their woodworking skills. He read: then he rolled the scroll back and sat down. Luke tells us that every eye in the house was fixed on Jesus. What would he say next? What would he do next? You and I can find out next week because that's our Gospel for the fourth Sunday after Epiphany. Those people didn't want to wait; they wanted to know now!

There was Jesus tired but fresh in a way from his wilderness experience; not a text we had this year, but Jesus with a clear cut notion of what God was luring him to do with his life in ministry. The Spirit of God was upon him as it had been on Isaiah.

Clearly, the Messiah has a message, and we still need to hear it.

1. Proclaim Good News to the Poor: Jesus was born into an impoverished family and he often paid attention to those whom everyone else overlooked. Some examples:

-Luke 14:13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.

-Luke 14:21 "The servant came back and reported this to his Master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.'

-Luke 18:22 When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

-Luke 21:2 He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins.

-John 12:8 "You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me."

2. Proclaim Freedom for the Prisoners/ To the Captive

Who are the prisoners? The Hebrew people knew about being captive. In Isaiah's day, it was those taken captive to Babylon. In Jesus' day, the Romans were the occupying force. Sin has a way of holding men captive.

3. Proclaim Recovery of Sight for the Blind-again a couple of examples:

Jesus restored the physical sight of many during his ministry, but he also recognized a spiritual blindness that could be cured only through the enlightenment regeneration brings.

Paul recounted his conversion experience and what Jesus said to him:

-Acts 26:17-18 "I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

-2 Corinthians 4:4 "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

4. Proclaim the year of the Lord's Favor: Every 50th year was to be set aside as a time for liberation and restoration when all Israelites would return to their ancestral land. Debts forgiven, land returned, begin again! The message of the Gospel is no less a message of the Lord's Favor, a celebration! Healing and grace and love for those who receive Christ.

When our text ended in verse 21, everyone was speaking well of him. That was short-lived. Jesus uttered the well-known statement, "No prophet is accepted in his hometown."

The people are amazed but they are also angered when he pointed out that when God wanted to work, he often had to turn to the Gentiles.

The people sought to throw him off the cliff, but he walked away. Then Jesus went and did what he said: he taught, he expelled a demon from a man, he healed

Peter's mother-in-law, and actually, he healed many people. They didn't want to throw him off a cliff; they begged him to stay!

During this season of Epiphany, the baby who was born in the manger on Christmas comes alive for us. During this season, we see who this child really is. We see Jesus in many different ways during this season. Last Sunday, we saw that he was concerned about his mother and wedding party he had attended. Jesus spent some time in a social context, he spent time with his family and with his friends. He spent days, not just a few moments of time that was his supposed duty, but Jesus valued the time he spent with his family, getting to know them, getting to see them as people and as friends. And in today's gospel lesson, we see Jesus in a different light. We see him in the synagogue and it was his turn to read. He turns to a passage in Isaiah and reads it. Then he sits down and begins to explain the passage, to bring the passage alive for the people.

As we saw in the reactions to today's text, some people reject Jesus, some seek him out. Some people try to have him eliminated, others beg him to become praised. What is your perspective of Jesus today?

The Messiah message gives us insight into Jesus, and direction into the Jesus life. Is Jesus welcomed in your life? In your heart? In your mind? In your home?

Folks, it is through that powerful message of Jesus, that God the Holy Spirit has welcomed you into God's kingdom, freed you from the oppression of sin, and promised you life eternal in heaven. What amazing things our God does through his powerful Word. May he help us to treasure it, continually amazed at its power and promises. May we, like Jesus, say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Amen.

“SIMEON’S STORY IS OUR STORY”

Message for the *Presentation of Our Lord* Sunday

From Pastor Norman Staker

February 2, 2025

MALACHI 3: 1-4 * HEBREWS 2: 14-18 * LUKE 2: 22-40

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

Anyone here ever hear of Murphy’s Law for Preachers; it has to do with church attendance. I know you’ve heard of Murphy’s Law that states, ‘Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.’ It can also be interpreted as the idea that if there are multiple ways to do something, and one of those ways could result in disaster, someone will do it that way. I think the folks who set up our liturgical year were victims of Murphy’s Law, if there are multiple ways to do something, and one of those ways could result in disaster, someone will do it that way. Murphy’s Law for Preachers says: If the weather is extremely bad, church attendance will be down; if the weather is extremely good church attendance will be down; finally, if the bulletin covers are in short supply, church attendance will exceed all expectations. Bob McGinnis handed out our bulletins every Sunday while he was able and I’m sure he could tell you some stories!

We have been up and down in Jesus’ life. This is the last time I’m going to remind everyone that on Christmas Eve, we celebrated the birth of the Christ Child, the following Sunday, December 29th, Mary and Joseph are in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and Jesus is 12 and he’s in the temple amazing the teachers with his questions, and for the next three Sundays, we’re sitting at home due to weather issues closing our doors. If we had been here or if we read it online, we would have heard the words of John 1: 1-18: ‘In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us.’ That’s also when we met the ‘man sent from God whose name was John.’ Now we all know from personal experience that sitting at home doesn’t keep us from getting older because we do every day, but Jesus is now 30 in the next Gospel we would have heard, so he’s aged 18 years since the previous Sunday, luckily we don’t age that fast, but Jesus

is being baptized by John, Jesus of all people is being baptized; in allowing John to baptize him, Jesus identifies with humanity, and with our sin; he models submission, and if he can, so can we; Jesus does not need baptism but he chooses to be baptized; the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove and the voice of God says, 'You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.' The following Sunday there's a wedding in Cana and Jesus and his disciples are there and so is 'the mother of Jesus,' not identified by name but among those present. Even Jesus referred to her as 'Woman.' The wine runs out and since Jesus is there, problem solved. He instructed them to 'fill the jars with water,' water that was used for the Jewish rites of purification, 6 large water jars each holding from 20-30 gallons. Jesus tells them to give some to the chief steward; they do, and the man complains that the best wine has been kept for the end of the party when it's normally given to the guests at the start and the bad stuff is kept for those left who are severely drunk and don't know the difference. The disciples knew and of course, so did the mother of Jesus and so did Jesus. This was the first of Jesus' signs, not miracles; John doesn't use the word 'miracle' here, just 'sign.' By now, we're back in church, the weather's better, and we hear again from Luke where Jesus is again in the temple, he's been gone, and he's asked to read from the scrolls. He chose Isaiah where it says, "God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives," words, as our "Christ in Our Home" tell us, 'are not only an important reminder of what God has done. They are also a proclamation of what God is doing in Jesus in the present and will do in the future; release, recover, free the oppressed.' So we've seen Jesus go from birth, to 12, to 30, to his first sign, his first miracle, changing water into wine, then back to the temple to read from the scrolls, and today, Jesus is now 8 days old! Are we confused yet?!

All of us have a favorite 'character' if you will, in the Christmas story. If you ask most children who theirs is, it's Jesus and it is for many adults; it's a natural response. But some people like Simeon, the man in our text today.

We meet Simeon on the day Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple for his dedication ceremony, as required by the law of Moses. In another part of town, Simeon felt a nudge in his heart to go to the temple. He was not told why; he just knew he was to go. Luke writes: "Guided by the Spirit," he went to the Temple.

Ever have a divine prompting like that? It might be mysterious; a voice in your head or perhaps a name you haven't thought of in years flashes through your mind, and you feel the urgent need to pause and pray for them or give them a call.

Whatever the case, Luke tells us this wasn't the first time God had spoken clearly to Simeon. Once before, when he was younger, maybe in his 30's or 40's, we don't know, but God had assured Simeon, that he would see the Messiah before he died. Verse 26: "It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah."

Forty days have passed since the birth of Jesus. Mary and Joseph now return to the Temple for their Purification and to "dedicate" their firstborn son. There was no halo over the holy family or flashing arrow pointing down at them to distinguish them from hundreds of other families, so how would he know which child, which family? There were many young families coming to dedicate their newborn sons.

Aside from what we are told in Luke 2, we know nothing about Simeon. We don't know his background, his hometown, his education, or even his occupation. Luke tells us that he is an old man—but even that is not a certain fact. He simply appears on the stage of history in the drama surrounding the birth of Christ. After his part is over, he fades from the scene, never to be heard from again.

This was a divine encounter. Luke tells the story this way: "Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God" and we hear the words of what we have called the 'Nunc Dimittis' spoken by Simeon.

How long had Simeon been waiting to see the Messiah? How many years had passed between the Holy Spirit revealing to him that he would not die until he had seen the Christ? We are not told. Whatever the amount of time that had passed, Simeon was waiting in eager expectation, for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel.

Simeon was waiting. No doubt he was living in Jerusalem and as a righteous man he would have been a regular attendee at the Temple for worship and prayer. The Holy Spirit had told him, "You will not die before you see the Messiah."

Each day Simeon would be at the Temple. Over the years how many questions did he have? How would he know what the Messiah would look like? What or who should he look for? Was he to look for a baby? Or was he looking for a teenager or a strong young man like King David? No one knows the answer to those questions. I know I didn't just from the information I shared with you at the beginning of this message! He didn't either but he held on to the promise and waited.

Day by day he kept watch over the throngs coming into the Temple. Each time a young couple came in with a baby, he whispered, "Is that the one?" Perhaps he is now 75 or even 80 years old. Perhaps he has a long gray beard, stooped shoulders, wrinkled face, bushy eyebrows, and trembling hands. If so, then he knows it can't be long. The Lord must be coming at any moment.

Into the temple walks Mary holding the baby in her arms with Joseph by her side. Jesus is only forty days old. Nothing unusual about the couple. Joseph is a poor carpenter from Nazareth; she is a peasant girl carrying a little baby boy. They are obviously from the country. They obviously don't have much money. If you were people-watching, you wouldn't give them a second glance.

I can see Simeon waiting, watching. Which one? What family? What child? Then suddenly the Spirit, the voice of Jesus points him to Mary and Joseph.

Suddenly Simeon's heart leaps within him. The long days of waiting are finally over. The Lord's Messiah is before him. Here is the One for whom the nation has been waiting. He walks over, introduces himself, and says, "Do you mind if I hold your child?" As Mary gives the infant Jesus to Simeon, he praised God. His words became a song that has come down through the centuries to us as the final and climactic song of Christmas.

Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed, and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

Your baptism into the family of God makes you a candidate for hearing the voice of Jesus, especially if there is a task He wants to accomplish through you. Maybe in the past you have heard the voice of Jesus through an encounter with an angel. If an angel shows up, life gets complicated. This is going to scare the pants off of you... but that is why the first words of the angel were and still are: "do not be afraid".

Simeon predicted that a sword would pierce Mary's heart. When Mary watched her son die, a sword pierced her soul. The Bible does not separate the cradle from the cross. This little baby was born to die. The joy of Christmas leads on to the agony of Good Friday. Jesus was born to die.

This is why the one born in the Cradle of Christmas cannot be separated from the beam of the Cross. So that we might be rescued, redeemed from eternal death and the wrath of a righteous Creator, God resolved to send His only Son, Jesus, into the world. Born true man so that He might take our place, and true God so He might live a perfect life, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The keeping of God's promise is who the Wise Men came to see, then the Spirit of Jesus in a dream warned them to return home a different way.

Jesus then carried all of our broken commandments to the cross. When He died he left them there, stripping Satan of any possible accusation for those who hold to the cross of Jesus.

As we reflect on Simeon and Anna's devotion, let's be inspired to trust in God's perfect timing. In a world filled with uncertainty, we can take comfort in the knowledge that God has a plan for each of us, meeting our physical, spiritual, and emotional needs. May we leave here with hearts open to seeing His provisions in our lives, both large and small, and a desire to seek and celebrate His presence. As we await Christ's return, let us join in joyful praise, embracing the hope and light that God provides through His perfect provision.

AMEN!!

“JESUS CAME AND SAT DOWN”

Message for the Fifth Sunder after Epiphany

From Pastor Norman Staker

February 9, 2025

ISAIAH 6: 1-8 (9-13) * 1 CORINTHIANS 15: 1-11 * LUKE 5: 1-11

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

A boy asked his father, “Dad, what is the size of God?” His father looked up at the sky and saw a plane and asked his son, “What is the size of that plane?” The boy replied, “It is very small. I can hardly see it.”

Then the father took the boy to an airport, and as they approached a plane, the dad asked his son, “Now, son, how big is this plane?” The boy replied, “Wow, Dad, it’s huge!”

Then the father told him, “God’s size depends on how close you are to Him. The closer you are to Him, the bigger and greater He will be in your life!”

My message this morning was originally going to be titled “We’re Going To Need A Bigger Boat!” It’s a quote from the movie JAWS when a guy was deep sea fishing and got a huge shark on his line. If you’re a Jaws enthusiast, you recognized that quote right off. However, I chose to title this, “Jesus Came and Sat Down.” You’ll see why in a few moments:

This is a story from the Gospel of Luke that is one that just won’t let me go. I want to read it and put it away but I can’t. My imagination just wants to run wild with it and my heart is moved as well. Several little tidbits that we need to take notice of; no they’re not insignificant but they’re just not stressed by Luke.

Two come to mind right off: The first is that Jesus is hanging out and teaching among the fishing crowd, and he’s doing so intentionally. There was a social/cultural hierarchy among Jesus’ Jewish contemporaries. Of course, the rich were over the poor; men over women but wealth trumped gender in most

circumstances; practically any working profession over tanners, the lowest rung because they handled dead animals and animal blood on a regular basis, then came the shepherds, because they were mostly hired hands who hung out with smelly livestock, however, don't forget that God portrays himself as a shepherd and Jesus himself as the Good Shepherd, and then there were the fishermen, to my knowledge there are no fisher-women in the New Testament, and, fishermen weren't as far down the ladder as tanners or the shepherds, but they weren't people you'd invite to your Passover parties if you could help it. Early in his ministry, Jesus is out among the fishermen and those trying to buy fresh fish. He is clearly not trying to rub shoulders with the higher ups of his world.

Second, Peter who often didn't get it at all, seems to have been the first to recognize that something much more powerful was at work in the miraculous catch of fish than the largest take he'd ever seen in a single net casting. The fact that he acknowledges his sin in such an extreme manner, falling down at Jesus' feet, shows us that he sees God's presence in Jesus and in the miracle.

Here we have fishermen, professionals, who are down on their luck. They fished almost every day except Sabbath. They were good at what they did. They supported themselves and their families with the fish they caught, and the people in the villages nearby depended on them to provide fresh fish for them to purchase so they could eat. Jesus happens upon them on a really bad day. They had fished all night long and, unless Peter was exaggerating, they hadn't caught a single fish. Jesus, who was not a fisherman, gives them advice on how to fish, and for some reason they are willing to take his advice, even though they were exhausted and even though their nets were already washed and ready to put away for the day. Maybe it was because he was a preacher, preaching the word of God. Plenty of people then and now are willing to take some risks if so directed by a preacher because they assume the preacher has a special 'in' with God.

I read about one minister who was on a plane and had his Bible open, trying to come up with a sermon idea for the following Sunday. Someone sitting across the aisle saw his Bible and said "Thank God. I know we'll land safely now." That statement was directed at the minister of course so he said, 'I beg your pardon?' The man said, 'Well I saw you studying your Bible. You must be a man of God! We know now that God will get us safely home!' To which the minister replied, 'Well, thanks for the vote of confidence, but if that were true, clergy people would be much wealthier since we'd all take turns riding on planes to prevent plane crashes! Sorry sir. If you check passenger lists of crashed planes, you'll find, I'm afraid, the names of now deceased men and women of God.'

Okay, so the fishermen tried one more time and caught the catch of their careers! They and all who observed were amazed.

Our text then says, ‘Then Jesus said to Simon, Peter, “Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.” And it concludes, ‘When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.’

The public ministry of Jesus is not a solo mission. He needed and called disciples, disciples being followers of Jesus who learn from him and imitate his teachings, disciples voluntarily chose to follow Jesus; some of those disciples became Apostles, meaning ‘one who is sent’ and they carried on the work that he founded and empowered; they were chosen by Jesus to spread the Gospel. Interesting to note, not all of the disciples became Apostles. Even today disciples of Jesus are carrying the banner of Christ into a dark and lost world. That’s our mission.

In that sense, as we see the calling of the first disciples, we are sensing that He is calling us into his mission to save the world. Do we hear the call? Are we willing to take the first steps to following the Master? Are we continuing in the mission?

If Jesus is calling you today, will you answer? The entire story of Jesus is, in a sense, a calling out to all of humanity that says, “I love you, I was willing to die to save you from your sins; I’m preparing a place for you.”

Those fishermen were washing their nets. They had fished all night and were washing their nets. Exhausted and not too happy for this stranger to want to get out on the water to hold a revival! Peter, Andrew, James and John had spent the night fishing with dragnets. It was backbreaking work, casting and drawing in a 100 foot net over and over again. Even though they had worked so hard through the night they did not catch a fish. At dawn they beached their boats, ate breakfast, and under the warming sun engaged in the tedious and necessary process of washing, mending, and arranging their nets for drying. Once dry, they would be folded and placed back in the boats for the coming night. On this life-changing day, the large crowd was pressing around Jesus.

Jesus is determined to speak to the crowd. Jesus was determined to share the good news of the kingdom with as many as he could. How determined is Jesus to speak to us? Are we listening?

There are many great fish stories in the Bible (including one about a prophet who took a three-night stay in the whale motel!) But this is not just a great fish story!

Jesus' request to go back out to fishing in the deep is met with a little resistance by Peter. Peter always says what we are thinking - grateful for him! Peter speaks from the voice of experience, he knows there are no fish ... he is exasperated ... but he obeys. Jesus always makes demands of us to help us grow and understand more about him. His teachings do not always make sense to us. They challenge us and grow us.

Peter was so tired and exhausted after a hard and long day at work. He toiled all night without catching any fish. In simple terms, he worked hard all night but caught nothing. It was hard work without any result. He had a difficult day at work. At this point, Jesus got into Peter's boat and sat down in it.

Jesus didn't care about Peter's past, or the fact that he toiled all night but caught no fish. He didn't ask him how he was doing. He simply came and sat in Peter's boat. Jesus did not ask Peter's permission before entering and sitting in Peter's boat. When we are in difficult situations, Jesus comes and sits in our boat or in our lives without our knowledge, without our permission. If Peter had been having a good day at work, he would have resisted Jesus' attempt to enter and sit in his boat.

Peter was concentrating on his bad day at work when Jesus came and silently sat in his boat that day. So many times in our life, when we are in our most difficult times, the similar thing happens, Jesus silently comes and sits in our lives and makes us part of his plans. We are concentrating on our difficulties when Jesus silently enters and sits in our lives.

Jesus did not meet Peter's need first, but he was fulfilling His Father's plans. The Father's plans are a higher priority in Jesus' life and Jesus tries to fulfill our needs by making us part of the Father's plans. In our difficult situations, without meeting our need Jesus makes us part of his plans. He gives instructions for his plans rather than meeting our needs. Others are benefited while our needs are not met. Jesus spoke to Peter as if he did not know Peter's need. Jesus entered and sat down in Peter's boat, and started speaking to the multitude. The multitude of people are benefited. But Peter did not see his need met initially.

When we obey the demands of Jesus, we will see God at work in our lives ... answering prayers ... reaching out ... growing our spirit, putting us in a position to serve him in greater ways.

How many of us are praying with a spirit that expects God to provide a blessing? When we are disciples of Jesus, He can use our obedience, our spirit, our attitudes, and our works to bring about His will in surprising ways!

Do we really understand Peter's statement? In the presence of Jesus, he sensed his own failure and weakness. Only when we humble ourselves before God can we know the saving power of Jesus Christ. Romans 3:10 "There is no one righteous, not even one."

Even so, Jesus uses us in spite of our weakness! Not only did Peter give himself over to Christ, so did the other fishermen there. With Jesus as our King, there's a new assignment. He's going to make us fishers of men. We adopt the perspective of Christ, seeking, reaching, loving other people in hopes that they also will follow Jesus.

Up to the moment of Jesus' challenge to them, from all indications, the fishermen had been mostly concerned with fishing for fish, and almost instantaneously, as a result of a single encounter with Jesus from all we know, they change their focus. They didn't stop fishing for fish altogether any more than Jesus had left behind carpentry altogether, but the focus now would be on trying to help people open themselves, awaken themselves to the presence of God within them. That is what fishing for people is all about; it's certainly not about how many human fish we can catch.

I wonder where Jesus might call me and you, if we stopped treating fish counts and clean nets as of utmost importance.

Arnold Palmer was playing a golf tournament in Saudi Arabia. The King was so impressed with him that he wanted to give Arnold a gift.

Arnold said, "Thank you Sir, but that's not necessary." That insulted the King; you don't say "no" to the King of Arabia. Being told of his error, he wisely reconsidered and said, "I would be glad to receive a new golf club from His Highness – a memento of my time here in Saudi Arabia."

The next day a messenger from the King came to Arnold's hotel room with the title deed to one of the Golf Clubs in America – a thirty-six-hole golf course, with trees, lakes, and a country club.

The King of Heaven also thinks much larger than you and I are thinking! Ask largely, for the King is not stingy in His gifts!

AMEN!!

“ARE YOU ON GOD’S A-LIST OR HIS BLACKLIST?”

Message for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
From Pastor Norman Staker
February 16, 2025

JEREMIAH 17: 5-10 * 1 CORINTHIANS 15: 12-20 * LUKE 6: 17-26

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

Then Jesus looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.”

Let me ask you a question: Does the Lord’s presence make you uncomfortable? Now, before you answer that, you’re thinking that’s an odd question to be asking us; here we are, sitting in our comfortable padded pews in the ‘sanctuary!’ I mean, isn’t that what we call our worship space?

Those of you who were here last Sunday, sitting in the sanctuary, heard readings from Jim and myself about some people who, in their contact with God, were moved to express their unworthiness. A vision of divine glory overwhelmed Isaiah with the holiness of ‘the Lord of hosts,’ before whom he was a ‘man of unclean lips.’ After condescendingly agreeing to follow Jesus’ fishing directions, Peter discovered just how little he knew and cried out “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” And Paul told us how he had rejected what God did in raising Jesus from the dead. All three faced revelations of God’s greatness that dwarfed their

expectations. These surprises evoked responses quite foreign to our culture of self-affirmation: a consciousness of their own unworthiness before such a glorious God.

I think we'd all agree that we don't want people diving under their pews during worship, a God before whom we feel fully composed and confident is not the 'holy, holy, holy...Lord of hosts' seen by Isaiah. Do we settle for a tame God, one who happens to approve of everything we do and disapprove of whatever we don't like?

Thinking more recently, though not that recently, we've all heard of Galileo and how, about 400 hundred years ago, he argued that Aristotle was wrong about gravity. If you took two objects with one heavier than the other, Aristotle had said if one was ten pounds and the other was one pound, the ten-pound object would fall ten times faster. Galileo said, 'No. They will fall at the same speed.' But nobody paid any attention to him. They thought that he was a little crazy. They simply dismissed it, because obviously he was wrong. To prove himself, he climbed up the Leaning Tower of Pisa. He took with him two objects, one heavier than the other, and he dropped them over the edge. To the amazement of the crowd, the heavier one did not fall faster than the light one. The answer to this scientific question was not what everyone was so certain was obviously true.

Then there's that old saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. I interpret this odd saying to mean that we can wind up hurting someone, even though we intended to help. Remember what Paul said in Romans 7 that the good he wanted to do, he did not do it; but the evil that he did not want to do, that is what he did.

Many Christians place their religious emphasis on sin. They are certain they know what God requires of every human being who wants to avoid going to hell. Human beings, so they believe, are stained by original sin from birth due to the fall of Adam and Eve and deserve nothing more than condemnation. They believe that God has provided a means to rid humans of the punishment and guilt due them because of both original and actual sin, and bring them into a right relationship with God once again.

My point, is not that humans do not commit sins, but, rather, that the emphasis on sin often is an obstacle to spiritual growth and a loving relationship with both God and other human beings. If we view God primarily as a stern judge, though with a certain measure of mercy, and we view the chief characteristic of human beings as

sinfulness, we are not likely to come to the full love of God to which God calls us. Fear of sin and punishment is an obstacle to perfect love, because perfect love casts out fear.

We can look at the cross, the primary symbol of our faith, from the viewpoint of sinful humankind, or we can look at the cross as a symbol of the lengths to which God is willing to go to give us the means to grow into God's own life. We can look at Jesus primarily as a sacrifice, or we can look at Jesus as the Incarnate God through whom creation is joined to its creator. We can view Jesus as a bridge over a chasm between creation and Creator, a chasm that we previously had no hope of crossing. For certain, we can look at the cross as a symbol of tests we must pass in order to earn our way into heaven, or we can look at the cross as a symbol of the lessons we must learn in order to be joined more completely to God in love. If life is a school in which we are to learn how to love and be transformed into what God calls us to become, it calls for a different understanding of how we relate to God in our daily lives than if we place our stress on our sinfulness. Our desire to love God is a sign of our love for God. God honors our honest efforts, even if we make mistakes, which we are certain to do.

St Augustine once said, 'Love God and do as you please.' Augustine was not urging us on to unbridled license to do whatever we want to do. The key is that we are to love God first and then do what we please. But if we love God, we will try to do what pleases God. If we deliberately set our wills against God's will, we cannot say that we truly love God.

Jesus chided the scribes and Pharisees because, although their outward actions were entirely in keeping with the law of Moses, their inward intentions too often were contrary to the spirit of the Law, unloving of both God and neighbor. Jesus taught that why we do something matters more than what we actually do. And he taught that when disciples act out of faith and love, the results may not be measured as successful by the world's standards.

So, where do you and I, we, stand with God? What type of people does God favor? Or to put it another way, "Who would be on God's A-list?" and "Who would be on God's Blacklist?"

To people 2,000 years ago the answer to this question seemed obvious and certain. God's A-list was comprised of the "good people" - upstanding citizens, popular and well-liked, religious people, those who had in a sense "arrived" and were satisfied. God's Blacklist was comprised of those who were the rejects of society.

Those who were failures, wicked, admitted sinners who were unpopular and rejected. Clearly such people would not be on God's A-list! Jesus comes along and like Galileo reveals that the popular answer was the wrong answer. In fact, the popular assumption about who God approved and disapproved of was totally erroneous.

Those people who were thought by themselves and others to be God's favorites were actually on God's blacklist and those who were thought by themselves and others to be especially offensive and rejected by God were actually the ones with the most potential to be on God's A-list!

How about you and me? Are we on God's A-list or His Blacklist? Are we in a position to receive God's applause or His condemnation? Are we approved or disapproved? Blessed or cursed? This seems to me to be a very important question with considerable ramifications for this life and the one to come. On such an important question, I'm glad that we are not left guess work. Jesus has answered the important question of who is on God's A-list and Blacklist in Luke chapter 6. He has given us God's criteria, which is the only criteria that really counts.

In our Gospel text this morning, Jesus gives us some characteristics of those on God's A-list and His Blacklist.

1. People on God's A-list are spiritually humble, while people of God's Blacklist are spiritually arrogant.

Jesus used the terms "poor" in vs. 20 and "rich" in vs. 24 to figuratively express this truth and to contrast those who came to God with two different attitudes. The humble come before God and men feeling poor, that is they consider themselves destitute of anything that would make them commendable before God. The arrogant come before God and men feeling "rich," that is self-confident in their righteousness, sure that they are pretty good people and that overall God is pleased with them.

2. People on God's A-list are spiritually hungry, while people on God's Blacklist are spiritually apathetic.

Jesus said that those who are "blessed", those who are on God's A-list, are those who "hunger now." Jesus is referring to spiritual hunger as is made clear in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus is quoted as saying "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Jesus is saying that God especially approves

of those who have a holy hunger. God's heart and attention are captured by those who have a burning desire for the things of God.

Are you one of these people? Do you have a holy hunger? Do you have the zeal of the Apostle Paul who despite his spiritual standing, knowledge and success could say in chapter 3 of his letter to the Philippians, "I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings...Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize..." This is the type of attitude Jesus was referring to when He said "Blessed are you who hunger now for you will be satisfied."

In our passage today, Jesus is addressing a mixture of people: Jews from Judea and Jerusalem; people from Tyre and Sidon, a gentile area; and a large number of disciples.

In this passage we observe the authority of Jesus: as a healer; an exorcist; and a prophet.

We read in verses 18 and 19 that people came to be healed and that all of them were cured. These healings were a demonstration of the power that Jesus has to undo the effects of sin. Not that every disease was, and is, a direct result of a sin that someone had committed. But when sin came into the world so did sickness, death and hatred. By healing people, Jesus was showing why he had come, to undo the effects of sin.

If you've listened very closely to our text today, you'll see that Jesus delivers a sermon that is parallel in many ways to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount, but here on "level ground," we'll call it, he paints two kinds of characters: one "blessed" and the other "cursed," depending upon a person's present conduct and attitudes.

There is no mistake, that in this passage from Luke, we are being called to live today, as members of God's kingdom. We are being called to pattern our life after Jesus, who not only spent time discerning his relationship with God, and following his Father's will, but also cared and ministered to people in need, especially those whom we often ignore.

Finally, it is my belief that in this passage from Luke, the list of woes that Jesus proclaims, is not meant to be a list of things that Christians need to avoid in order to gain access to God's kingdom. Jesus is not asking us to become poor and hungry in order to merit a life in God's kingdom. Rather, I believe that Jesus is saying that those whom our society regards as being successful, those who have made the grade, and have achieved success according to our society, may have a hard time realizing that in God's kingdom, their earthly status is of no avail. They will no longer enjoy the prestige of their earthly wealth or position, for they will be on an even basis with the poor, the hungry, and those whom they have long ignored.

The truth is, we have all sinned and fall short of what it means to belong to the kingdom of God – both spiritually and in our relationship with those around us.

Jesus' words are shocking words, but they are words that we need to hear. We need to hear them over and over again so that we can be reminded about what is true and align our lives to that truth.

Amen

“LOVE YOUR ENEMIES – SO EASY TO SAY”

Message for the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

From Pastor Norman Staker

February 23, 2025

GENESIS 45: 3-11, 15 1 * CORINTHIANS 15: 35-38, 42-50

LUKE 6: 27-38

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

Jesus said, “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Joseph's brothers intended to harm him but God intended to work through their actions for good. Ultimately this truth allowed Joseph to forgive his brothers. Forgiveness may sometimes be a decision we have to make but we can do so trusting that God will work good through it.

We have skipped ahead a few generations in Genesis to get to today's reading. So to quickly summarize, Abraham, who wanted a son, fathered a son by the name of Isaac. Isaac was the father of two children, Esau and Jacob. Jacob or Israel as he will later be called, has twelve sons, and at least one daughter. Of all of these children, Jacob has a favorite child—his son Joseph. Joseph is Jacob's favorite because although he is one of the youngest children of Jacob, he is the first child of Jacob's favorite wife Rachel.

Jacob has this little problem with favoritism. He treats his wife Leah as a second-class citizen even though she is the one who gives birth to most of his children. And he treats Rachel's son Joseph with such open and obvious favoritism that his brothers take note. Jacob even goes so far as to put his favoritism on display by

gifting Joseph a beautiful coat or robe. Tradition claims this was a coat of many colors but the Hebrew is much simpler in its description referring to it as a long-sleeved long coat.

This did not go over well with his brothers. Solely because of Joseph's impressive coat, Joseph's brothers have a hard time even talking to him. They are jealous.

As if Jacob's blatant favoritism isn't enough, there is one other reason that the brothers can't stand Joseph. We hear of that in the opening of today's stories. Joseph has dreams and not just any dreams, but dreams which he interprets as giving him superior status to his brothers. Though we only hear of the dream about sheaves of wheat, he also has another dream along the same lines.

Joseph dreams that he and his brothers are all sheaves of grain and that for whatever reason, Joseph's sheave rises up and his brothers' sheaves all bow down to it. His brothers said, "So! You're going to rule us? You're going to boss us around?" And they hated him more than ever because of his dream and the way he talked.

I'm not sure whether Joseph was totally naïve or rather arrogant by telling his brothers this dream, but his two dreams here really push the brothers completely over the edge. So much so that they are ready to kill him, literally kill him.

Thankfully, Reuben, Jacob's oldest son, convinces them not to (but only so that he can "rescue" Joseph and hopefully earn some of his father's favor for himself.

Judah, another brother of Joseph is the one who comes up with the winning plan, however. And so the brothers end up selling the beloved child into slavery in Egypt.

I wonder what it felt like for Joseph to be so betrayed by his brothers. Whatever slavery was like for Joseph, it seems to have strengthened him in his walk with God and matured him into a man through whom God was able to do great things.

Years later, a severe famine hits the land. Pharaoh had been warned in a dream about this famine—a dream which Joseph had interpreted for him, and as such, had been storing up grain for years and years. Pharaoh had placed Joseph in charge of the whole economic system by this point. Pharaoh had given him a huge

promotion. As such, Joseph was the one responsible for doling out the excess grain.

Word of Egypt's excess reaches all the way back to Canaan and to the family of Jacob. Desperate the brothers travel there and bow down before Joseph. They don't recognize their brother, but Joseph recognizes them. And though he tests them to see if they have changed, he gives them what they need freely and eventually reveals himself to them.

Joseph's father and the rest of the family come to Egypt where Pharaoh provides not only all the grain they need, but also the finest land in the country for them to settle on.

While this story of Joseph is a great one in and of itself, it also contains some lessons for us. See throughout Genesis God had been working for the good of all creation and the salvation of all people. And this continues through the Joseph story. God's love travels to Egypt in the person of Joseph and preserves the life of many people. Joseph is able to look back on the trials of his life and see God's hand at work in them which is why he can tell his brothers "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people."

This story of Joseph teaches of the power of God to work in hidden ways and to do what Romans 8:28 says "work all things together for the good of those who love God." Unlike his ancestors in the faith Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Joseph does not have any grand visions or noteworthy conversations with the Lord. Instead, he experiences God much the same way we do... in our hearts and minds guided by the Holy Spirit.

We too have the promise that God has called us according to God's own purposes and for God's own reasons. I suspect that as each of us reflects on different times and events in our lives, we can see God at work—perhaps in leading us into a vocation that we love, or into a relationship with the spouse that is just perfect for us, or gifting us with children and family and friends that make life abundantly rich. And even if we never do anything as grand as Joseph did with the saving and preserving of numerous people, we are still called by God to love our neighbors and love even our enemies.

In short, we are to practice radical forgiveness, forgiveness like what Joseph showed to his brothers at the end of today's first reading. This kind of forgiveness is tough but possible. The first reading ends with the words: 'And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.'

In our gospel reading this morning. Jesus teaches us that we are to do something very difficult—we are to love those who don't love us, those who would do us harm, and those who have hurt us. Moreover, we are to do good to them, expecting nothing in return.

After talking to his disciples, Jesus now turns to all who will listen. In a series of sayings, all applying the way God loves to the way Christians should love, operative word here is 'should,' he illustrates how generosity in its many forms is also a form of love and a form of forgiveness.

Although Luke says that Jesus is speaking to his disciples, it is clear that he also means to include a much larger and varied audience, especially the "rich." God's promise of salvation is an invitation to all to become the "poor of God," but not all accept it. The "rich," including the economically rich, but not restricted to them, are those who remain content with their present, materially, emotionally, spiritually comfortable existence. The way to become the "poor of God" is to imitate God in his generous giving of gifts, be they material, emotional or spiritual, and expecting nothing in return. So, by using concise statements, making it easy to remember, Jesus says the same thing in each of these verses: imitate God by lending money, forgiving debts, giving generously and loving enemies both inside and outside the Christian community.

When he says "love your enemies," it's not a command to feel good about one's enemies, but to do good toward them regardless of feelings. The word used here for "love" is the Greek word, agape, a word Christians reserved to refer to Jesus' special kind of love for others. Agape love is the best kind. Jesus' followers are not to be selective in loving, as in the case of friendship love. They are to love all, regardless of whether or not the other persons have good will toward them.

"Do good to those who hate you": It is not enough to refrain from hostile acts. Disciples are to actively do good. Contrary to the natural impulse to "hate those who hate you," the disciple returns love for hate. This defines "to love" as simply the same thing as "to do good." Love is an attitude that leads to action, not a feeling that is a reaction to a pleasant circumstance.

Verse twenty-eight, “bless those who curse you”: This is consistent with the above and can be done in the privacy of prayer. True Christian love finds expression in words as well as deeds. Though some will curse the Christian, he or she is not to retaliate in kind, but say positive things. This is done before others. But the acid test is when one prays and only God is there. To pray for those who mistreat oneself is a sure sign of love unless, of course, one prays that they be cursed.

In verse twenty-nine, “when someone slaps you”: A slap on the cheek is a metaphor for extreme insult. Even a physical slap is more humiliating than it is violent or painful.

In verse thirty, “give to all who beg from you”: Again, this extreme example illustrates the principle of generosity. A literal interpretation would result in saintly paupers and prosperous idlers and thieves. The word “give” is in the continuous tense in Greek and means “keep on giving.” It is a habitual attitude, not an occasional impulse, such as one might see at holidays. Such unremitting generosity may seem as absurd as giving to a beggar, but so it is with God’s love.

In verse thirty-one, “do unto others”: The “Golden Rule” does not say to do as others do unto us, but as we, ourselves, would like to be treated. It removes from the equation how others treat us.

In verse thirty-two, “if you love those who love you”: This carries on the thought of the “Golden Rule.” To love those from whom there is little hope for their reciprocating, such as friends might do, is to love like God does.

God is the example, the model, the pattern. Independent of the response, God bestows good gifts on all without distinction. His love is one-way.

In Greek, the language in which the New Testament was originally written, there are three words that are all translated into English as “love.” One word is the Greek word *eros*. Our English “erotic” comes from that word. It stands for in-love love, romantic love, love of the sexual kind. The same is true for friendship love. The Greek word for that is *philia*, “filial.” Which means having or assuming the relationship of child or offspring to parent. The third word for love is the Greek word *agape*. There is no English equivalent or derivative for this word. Yet, it is the word Jesus uses to describe what he is commanding of his followers. It is God’s kind of love, although God is also in love with each of us and wants to be friends with each one of us. This is not reciprocal, but is one-way love. It does not

depend on what the other person does or does not do. It is not good feeling love, but right attitude and action love. It acts in the best interest of the other, even when the other does not know of it or want it. All three kinds of love can co-exist, but it is in the absence of any type of good feeling that agape-love stands out. It is possible to love even one's enemies in this way, to act well toward them, despite negative feelings on both sides. "But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." It's up to you.

Amen.

“IS JESUS AN ALIEN FROM ANOTHER PLANET?”

Message for the *Transfiguration of Our Lord* Sunday

From Pastor Norman Staker

March 2, 2025

EXODUS 34: 29-35 2 * CORINTHIANS 3: 12-4:2

LUKE 9: 28-36 (37-43A)

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

The Transfiguration of Our Lord. I don't know about you but there's a few things that I struggle with concerning the Transfiguration. It's getting kind of tiresome. There is much we don't understand about it and yet every now and then we catch a glimpse of the strange and glorious nature of Jesus. Yes, it's the story of the transfiguration and probably one of my least favorite Gospel stories and there aren't that many.

When I realized the Transfiguration was scheduled for this week, I tried to get out of it. I thought about other people I could ask to preach and take the day off but I couldn't come up with anybody. I could have preached on Exodus and Moses and the Ten Commandments or Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the second book. Paul always has something really good to say. Besides, I hadn't gotten Council's approval for a vacation Sunday and it wasn't supposed to snow. Last Sunday's readings were actually one of two sets of readings that could be used this week, and I found that the alternate set included a Gospel reading where Jesus speaks of "loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us" - powerful stuff! This seemed far better but it was our bulletin insert for last Sunday!

Then I asked myself, "why am I shying away from the transfiguration?" What's so tough about the Transfiguration?

Well, for one thing, I find it hard to relate to; it doesn't really do anything for me. I must admit that I find it somewhat alienating. The Jesus of the transfiguration is not the Jesus I am used to. The Jesus of the transfiguration appears to be something

like a character out of a 'close encounters' type of movie, a strange, glowing figure who moves around in clouds and talks with long-dead figures from the past. This is not the Jesus I am familiar with. I don't feel particularly comfortable with the transfigured Jesus.

Then it occurred to me that if what was bothering me about the story of the transfiguration, it was because I didn't feel comfortable with its depiction of Jesus, and maybe, just maybe, I had become a little too comfortable with Him.

So let's review. The first Transfiguration Day so long ago probably started out as just one more day in the ministry of Jesus. We can picture the Twelve following our Lord along the path that would take them to the next village. Jesus probably knew but it's for certain that Peter, James, and John did not know what was about to happen; however, at a fork in the road, Peter, James, and John were pulled aside, and soon found themselves ascending a nearby mountain which has been identified as Mount Tabor in Israel. We know from other Gospel texts that Jesus frequently withdrew with small groups of people for prayer, so even this move did not appear unique to the disciples.

Finally, they got to the summit of the mountain. There Jesus began to pray, and it was as He prayed that He was transfigured before them: the appearance of his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him. Then a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were terrified as they entered the cloud. Then the voice, there were no judges, no coaches to pick from, just the voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!"

All of this overwhelmed the disciples. And good old Peter, always the first to speak up, says 'Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.'

Peter isn't trying to win brownie points. I mean, we can understand why he said what he did. Who wouldn't want to spend the rest of life upon the mountain where there was only glory and probably the two greatest Old Testament prophets ever AND Jesus? Why go back down into the valley where pain and conflict and heartache are always around?

I have to say this God whom we worship is not easy to understand, not simple to come to terms with. His ways are not our ways and His thoughts are not our thoughts. And this Jesus, whom we read of in the Gospels; yes, He looks like us

and He dwells with us and He is indeed one of us and yet, unlike us, He walks on water, He heals the sick, He raises the dead, He bleeds for those He loves, He forgives those who betray Him and at times He glows in a way that is quite bizarre!

I don't understand this glowing, transfigured Jesus! That's OK. The disciples didn't understand Him either! Look at Peter's response: "Let's set up three tents", says Peter - "one for you, Lord, one for Moses and one for Elijah".

It's not clear what Peter had in mind. It's not clear that Peter really knew what he had in mind. If he wanted to make everybody comfortable, why didn't he think in terms of one big tent, rather than three small ones, so that the threesome could go on talking comfortably. Luke, our Gospel writer, even offers his own opinion, that Peter really 'didn't know what he was talking about.'

Then we're told "when the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen." Jesus was God's chosen one, and when the cloud disappeared so did Moses and Elijah. The only thing left was Jesus with his brightened face, and what did they say? What could they say? They chose to say nothing, but the most ironic part of the story was that Peter and James and John intentionally decided to say nothing at the time. They must have made a pact, and we wonder when it was that they finally decided to break their silence. Would you have spoken?

Aside from Matthew's version and Mark's version, there are no other reports of transfigurations. For a brief moment the disciples were permitted to see the Lord in all the fullness of His majesty. For a brief moment at least there could be no doubt that He was the Son of God.

It was not for Jesus to remain on the mountain as it was. Immediately following the transfiguration on the mountain that day, a distraught father brings his son with seizures to Jesus and begs for Jesus to heal him. Down from the mountain, down from the glorification, Jesus is called to get right to work again. The little boy is healed, restored to his father, and all are astounded at the greatness of God. But even worse, the cross awaits Jesus in Jerusalem, but God is determined to accomplish good things through him every day along the way. The entire ministry of Jesus makes this clear.

I don't know what happened at the transfiguration. Was it some kind of common dream? Were those ancient characters really there in the flesh? Was that shining

aura emanating from Jesus the way the light of the cloud was bouncing off him or was it that strange glow emanating from within? I don't have a clue, and I don't think the disciples really had a clue either, as the only thing they seem to agree upon after the experience is that they won't tell anybody else about it.

Who can blame them? Mind you, they evidently revised their decision further down the track, I presume in the light of everything else that happened. For indeed, by the time you've come to terms with the way Jesus died and rose again and ascended, you're not going to be surprised to hear that on occasions He also moved through clouds, talked with Moses and glowed with a divine light!

The disciples were eventually able to take all this on board, but it took a good deal of time. For the most part, during the earthly ministry of Jesus, the disciples struggled to keep pace with where He was moving and what He was doing.

Indeed, being part of Jesus' original team was hard work, wasn't it, and not only because of the arduous physical conditions, but because listening to Jesus forced you to keep re-evaluating everything you thought you knew about God and religion!

This is indeed the broader context of this strange occurrence of the transfiguration. Jesus is telling the disciples about what it means for Him to be Messiah and what it means for them to be His disciples.

Jesus talks to them of 'Messiahship' in terms of suffering and death, and then turns to the crowd and says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" - thus promising suffering and death to His followers as well.

We allow these words to wash over us, I think, but when we look at them plainly, we must acknowledge that these statements fly in the face of every solid religious intuition that we have.

What does Jesus say following Him is all about? Self-sacrifice, suffering, and death!

We must not try to dilute the crazy nature of some of Jesus' statements, or the way in which they totally contradict our basic religious intuitions, even that most fundamental of all religious intuitions - our sense of justice.

Everybody knows that good should be rewarded and wickedness punished. We all know that, even though our experience of the world is that this does not happen when it should.

Not so, according to Jesus! In Jesus' world, the first come last and the last come first. Wicked people are forgiven and the poor are blessed, while the rich, the happy, and the healthy get the other end of the stick from a God who makes his rain fall on the just as well as the unjust!

Jesus does not affirm our simple sense of justice any more than He fits our simple predefined role of what God on earth is supposed to do. We look for a Messiah who will bring justice and peace and give security to the people of God from their many enemies. Instead we get Jesus, who forgives and bleeds and dies and rises and ascends, and who glows!

We struggle. We are weary. There is much we do not understand. At the very least, following Jesus is a tough call. We don't always know where He is taking us. We generally have no idea of what lies around the next corner. We know that following Him is going to cause us problems, make us enemies, cause us to bleed. And yet we have seen enough of the magnificence of Jesus to know that if we are following Him, we are heading in the right direction!

AMEN!!