

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

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Blinded by the Light

Each of the scriptures, the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Gospel were written in times that were politically charged and social injustice ruled the day. Isaiah refers to the Syro-Ephraimite crisis, when the northern kingdom and Syria pressured Judah to join an anti-Assyrian alliance. When Rome demanded the dissolution of the Achaian League, Corinth, the leader resisted, and Lucius Mummius, the Roman consul, leveled the city in 146 BCE, killed the men and sold the women and children into slavery. When Paul arrived in 51 CE, the Corinth he saw was little more than 100 years old, but was five times bigger than Athens. Paul chose Corinth as headquarters for his mission because the city was dynamic, flexible, not bound by traditions, and was a mix of people without strong ethnic identities, seeking honor and material success. The land where Jesus lived was under foreign occupation, and Jesus' actions were seen as politically motivated. *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."* These were threatening words to the ears of Roman leaders. The Gospel uses imperial language and structure in describing God's power, in the scenes of Jesus' healing and liberating, the power is re-defined, empowering the people.

In today's epistle, St. Paul seems to be scolding the churches for boasting of how great their individual leaders were, and how they have drifted from the example of Jesus. I can only imagine that disharmony and disunity lead directly to the divisiveness that followed. Paul asks, "Has Christ been divided?"

I think we find ourselves in a similar situation today. I have read many "Christian" opinions in the last couple years that are so divergent from each other, I found myself asking if Christ had been divided. "Christian opinions" are often not true to the character of the Jesus I know, and have read about in the Bible.

Today, Christian denominations seem to be scolding each other and creating disharmony in boasting about their views on how people should live, who qualifies for their rights, or that those who are different should be confined, or others are worth less than them because of cultural or physical differences. How far have we drifted from the central message of Christianity? How close are we to following the example of Jesus? There is disharmony and disunity among those who call themselves Christians today, and it seems like divisiveness is around every corner. Has Christ again been divided? This question is a valid one for us to ask as well.

Paul says, *"For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"* Paul wrote to the Galatians (3:28). *"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."* Paul seems to be asking, "Why can't we all just get along?" Or more pointedly, I think he is saying, "This is not the Jesus I know."

I think the message here is that we are not God. Our leaders are not God. As much as I am a priest, educated and ordained, there is no billboard on 95 that reads, "Jamie Saves!" I am, we are the branches, not the vine, and we all need to re-center our faith. We all need to be still. We all need to

be quiet and tune out the information free-for-all that we are inundated with, turn of the—storm of noise vying for our attention, and just BE STILL in the presence of God.

Has Christ been divided? Yes, but it is us who have driven a wedge between us, and between God. I think many of us have been *Blinded By the Light* of Christian ideology, instead of following the Light of Christ. But, it does not have to stay that way, and the rest of the lectionary tells us why we can overcome the darkness of division—Jesus.

Let's look at the scriptures. Isaiah today says; "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined." From the Psalm: "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom then shall I fear?"

In the Gospel, Matthew recaps Isaiah: "...and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned." And Jesus proclaimed, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*"

The scriptures all use light as a means to convey hope. Jesus is the light and we shall no longer live in darkness. Whom then shall we fear? We have only ourselves to fear, when we stop listening to our hearts, and allow doubt and fear to fill our heads. You cannot fight darkness with darkness. Darkness can only be overcome, by light.

In the second part of the Gospel Jesus calls Peter and Andrew to be his disciples. "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people. Immediately they left their nets and followed him." I want to make a little historic correction about this passage and the call stories in the Gospel. The commentary I read by NT Professor Warren Carter was very clear, Carter said, "*The men's immediate positive response in following Jesus is stark... Such initiative and gift are appropriately welcomed with an instant response... Their call and accepting response anticipate other people who join Jesus' followers. The Gospel's almost-exclusive focus on male disciples is troubling. We must remember that women were also among Jesus' followers. Matthew 27 indicates that women followers accompanied him in Galilee, so we must read their presence into all the Gospel scenes especially since the Gospel does not mention their presence.*" Carter makes a good point, reinforced by Genesis, "*God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. . . and it was very good.*"

This Gospel holds much meaning for me as a priest—called to fish for people. My favorite translation of this passage is from Luke, "Do not be afraid, from now on you will fish for people." Some of you may know that Maude (our Communications Director) and I both make jewelry using beads to spell words in Morse code. This passage meant so much to me while preparing for ordination, that I made a Morse code necklace out of it. However, after completing it, I realized I made a typo, as it read, "Do be afraid, from now on you will fish for people." Imagine my surprise—was this a warning from God about what I might expect from my call? So far, I'm good.

It took my ordination vows, for me to really internalize what Jesus meant by fishing for people—RELATIONSHIPS. Fish for people, go out and connect with people. And, once you are connected, show hospitality, respect them, invite them in, and love them. As the collect for today tells us, "*...answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation.*"

This is the Jesus that I know. Fish for people, build relationships with everyone—no exclusions, no exceptions. Fishing for people is NOT just for the ordained. Fishing for people is for every person who answers the call of discipleship in Christ—this means you. Love each other and respect the dignity of all people. Help others to thrive, because if the whole community thrives, we too shall prosper. Do not divide Christ, but be a unifying agent for Christ. Recognize the connection to all

people, stand up with and for each other, and do not listen to the noise of divisiveness and fear. Listen to your heart, and follow the light of Christ.

Like the scriptures, we too live in politically charged times. This weekend alone we experienced a Presidential Inauguration and the Women's March. A day or so ago a friend was upset about the exchanges between "the church" and political events, and reports of clergy attending the march. They wrote: "*The church has no business commenting on politics, they should stick to the Bible and teach only the lessons from it!*" These words are a conundrum for the church—the Bible is full of stories about politics and social justice. While I think that it is not ethical, responsible, or smart for a preacher to advocate from the pulpit for a particular candidate, or impose a political agenda on a congregation, I do understand the need to give clarity on what Jesus might do in the circumstances we face in our political climate. To avoid social justice issues, is not to preach the scriptures authentically. Jesus was all about social justice. The scriptures should not be used as a weapon by anyone for personal or political gain. We should not twist scripture to fit our agenda. We should adjust our agenda to follow the guidance of the scriptures, uphold the dignity of all people, and follow the words and examples of Jesus – love everyone, no exceptions. We need to be still, to breathe, to listen, to recognize that we are all children of God, even when we disagree, and to trust that God is with us—all of us. Love God, love your neighbor, and remember that what you do, matters. Amen

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