Sermon for Epiphany January 7, 2023

 As I walked to class one day, on the first day of a new semester of college, I decided that I was going to be a different kind of person. This was going to be a semester that led me to being a new version of me.

I honestly don’t remember why I thought I needed to do this, or who I was looking to as my inspiration, but I decided I was going to be the kind of person who didn’t talk a lot.

 It went about as well as you might expect if you’ve known me for more than about 10 minutes.

 If I had to guess, probably I had been around someone who seemed perfectly nice but didn’t talk much. Or maybe it had to do with my embarrassing tendency to say things that *sounded* better in my head. Somehow, I decided that just *not talking* would help me become a serene, graceful, *good* person, who almost never said things they regretted pretty much immediately.

 My little experiment failed. Basically as soon as someone sat down next to me and said hello, and didn’t stop with that, but kept talking, and I couldn’t be rude when I was trying to learn how to be serene, right?

 Eventually, I came to the conclusion that being serene and graceful in a silent kind of way was just not in the cards for me. I had to accept that **not** talking to other people just isn’t a part of who I am. That what seems to work for other people doesn’t always work for me.

I was just going to have to find another way to grow in faithfulness and grace.

Over the years, I’ve come to see that random conversations with other people is part of a path to joy and kindness and love and grace for me. By trying to be someone else, I was putting myself on a path that would have denied me the blessing of those interactions, the people loved me even if I said weird things now and then. God intervened by sending interesting people my way.

 In the Beatitudes, Jesus basically debunks the lie that we have to have our lives in order, or that we have to be someone we aren’t, before God will bless us.

Instead, God blesses us in the midst of our messy lives. You’re grieving? God’s going to send you comfort, probably through other people who have messy lives of their own. You’re poor in spirit, downtrodden, crushed by the pain of life? God hasn’t forgotten about you or abandoned you, and God’s not punishing you. You’re working for peace, even if you don’t get it right all the time? God calls you a beloved child.

 Immediately after those promises of God’s love and favor and blessing, Jesus tells his disciples that they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. And he warns them to not let themselves lose their saltiness, to not hide their light under a bushel basket. But instead, they need to be true to their nature, to be salty, to let their light shine before others.

 They are blessed, Jesus essentially says, not just for their own benefit, but also for the benefit of all those around them, and so that they can point to the *source* of their blessings – God.

 I try hard to keep the stories of the four Gospels separate in my mind, but I *can’t* read this passage without thinking about the beginning of John – “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world…to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

 Epiphany, today and the Sundays that follow up through the beginning of Lent, is all about telling us who Jesus is, and making sure that we know that Jesus was the living, breathing, walking and talking **will of God in the flesh.**

 We hear stories from Mark and John about the calling of the disciples. Mark tells us about Jesus’s power over the forces of evil that tormented a man, and about Jesus healing the mother-in-law of one of his followers. And then we get the story of the Transfiguration.

 All of it is intended to make clear to us that Jesus is the Son of God, with the power to heal and make whole.

 The readings we’ll hear these 6 weeks invite us to consider what our response to all that will be.

 Will we dwell in those texts with the reminder of Genesis 1:27 in our minds, remembering that we are created in the image of God?

That each of us bears the light of God within us. Not, as Jesus makes sure we know, not for our own glory but to point to the source of the light. To the source of all that is good and loving within us.

Which means that every time we are kind, every time we are grateful, every time we are patient, whenever we work for peace or justice, whenever we love our neighbor, or even just *try* to love our enemies, we are letting our light shine.

 It is, ultimately, up to us to decide whether we will hide our light or let the world see it. Whether we will ignore it or let the light guide us in our lives.

 To aid you on your journey with God this year, I’m offering each of you a little gift.

One word. A word that may provoke you to action or stop you in your tracks. A word that may offer clarity or confusion.

 Along the communion rail, I’ve laid out stars, face down. Each bears a word. Most of them are different, but there are a few repeats in there. In a few minutes, I’ll invite you to come forward and pick one up at random. By not looking at the stars, but just picking one at random, you practice not being in control of the moment, and you practice the spiritual task of receiving a gift.

 I encourage you to take your star home and keep it in a place where you’ll see it often throughout the year. Follow Mary’s example and ponder it in your heart. Consider the ways it leads you to see God in ways you may not have before.

Remember: God isn’t limited by the limits of our imagination. God uses a variety of ways to get our attention, and this might be one of those ways for you this year.

 I encourage you to trust in the word you’ve picked up, to not trade it with a neighbor or pick through the leftovers after worship, looking for something you like better. But I am not the star word police, so you do you.

 For those of you watching our video, if you’d like a star word, you can leave a comment on the video, text, call, or email me, and I’ll give you a word at random.

 Come forward, as you wish, and pick up a star.

As the star prompted the Magi to take their journey, a new way of understanding the world, I hope this word leads you to a new way of understanding how you can bear the light of God for others and how others can bear the light of God for you.

 May this be a year where you experience God’s blessing in the messiness of your ordinary life, and where you learn to let your light shine just a little brighter.

1. John 1:9, 12 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)