

John 1:43-51

Epiphany 2B + January 14, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Epiphanies

The Word of the Lord from John 1:51: Jesus "said to him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I'm told that in the Roman Empire, Roman officials would sometimes make visits on behalf of Caesar. These visits had a threefold purpose to them: the officials came to make an appearance, to hear the people and to give gifts. These appearances, I'm told, were called epiphanies. I'd imagine it was a pretty big deal, especially if you lived far from Rome. After all, when Air Force One lands in D.C., it's "hohum." When it lands in Boise, it leads the news.

Thinking through this a bit, who do you think would go to greet the visiting officials? I'm pretty sure it would be the honest and upstanding citizens. If you had nothing to hide and nothing to fear, you'd go to the town square, see the statesmen, maybe even speak up and make your thoughts known, and be happy to receive some token from the visit. On the other hand, if you were a criminal with your face on a poster at the post office, you wouldn't be there. You'd be hiding far away in some dark cave. The last thing you'd want is a visit from Roman officials.

Epiphanies weren't about breaking down doors and hauling away the bad guys – that would be a different sort of visit. Epiphanies were about making appearances, conversation and giving gifts. The word "epiphany," after all, means "appearance." It's from the Greek word that means "to shine upon." When you have an idea that's brilliant and illuminating, you've had an epiphany (and, if you're a cartoon character, a light bulb appears above your head to prove it!). And although an epiphany could mean the visit of a Roman official, it had a more standard meaning of "the appearance of a deity," of a god visiting men.

So let's say that God came to visit men in an epiphany like that. Let's say He came to make an appearance, to speak and to hear, and to give gifts to His people. Who do you suppose would show up for His appearance? Righteous people: people with nothing to hide and nothing to fear, people without sin who trusted He has gifts to give. Who wouldn't show up when God appeared? Unrighteous people: sinners, law-breakers and the like. They'd be hiding in the darkness: the last thing they'd want is a face-to-face with Holy God.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. That's what the Bible says; so it follows that, if God did make an appearance in His glory, He wouldn't have an audience. Everyone would scatter into hiding because of their sin. He'd have gifts to give, but no one to give them to. At this point, He have a couple of courses of action. He could take His gifts and go home; or, He could seek out those sinners on the run and start giving gifts when He caught them. How absurd a task is that? How much work would that take? What a pain to track down people who don't believe you've come to help, and who might still reject your mercy.

For instance, you've got a man in Genesis who is on the run, who has made a thorough mess of things. He's running for his life because his brother wants to kill him. First, he conned his brother into trading his birthright for a bowl of stew – lentil stew, no less, which is worse in my book than trading it for green beans. Later, he deceived his father into blessing him with his brother's inheritance. It's no

wonder his brother wants to kill him. The man's a deceiver. He's a cheater. In fact, his name means "he cheats to get what isn't his." His name is Jacob.

On the run from angry brother Esau, he falls asleep; and it's then that he experiences an epiphany, for the Lord appears to Him. While he sleeps, he dreams and sees a ladder stretching from earth to heaven. Heaven and earth are joined together by this ladder, so much so that angels are ascending and descending on it. The image is worth pondering: imagine that heaven and earth would be so close together as to be connected by a ladder. The Lord stands at the top of the ladder, and He declares that Jacob will be the father of a great nation. He tells him that through his descendants, all nations will be blessed because the Messiah will be born among them. Later on, the Lord will appear again and give him a new name: Israel. As the prophecy is fulfilled, Jacob will be remembered because his descendants will be known as Israelites, God's chosen people.

Why is the cheater the one who is chosen? It is certainly not because of his integrity and righteousness. He's on the run for his sin, his deceitfulness. No, Jacob is chosen because God chooses him in His wisdom and grace. Jacob is blessed with such gifts because the Lord appears and speaks and gives them. He speaks Jacob into an Israel: the cheater is made a patriarch. He even redeems the name Jacob: when you and I hear the name, we don't think "cheater" but "blessed." It's a great name now, a strong name, because the Lord has given it a new story. So Jacob is father of all Israel, *because God has visited him*. He's not the father of a great nation because he takes what isn't his, but because God gives him far more than he could ever get – and far, far more than he deserves.

Our Gospel lesson takes place centuries later, and God is still visiting His people. He's doing it a bit differently now because He's kept His promise to Jacob. The Messiah is born: God in the flesh is visiting His people. He is making an appearance. He comes to speak and to hear. He comes to give gifts: gifts of healing and forgiveness and life. He's just getting started in John 1, but already some believe in Him. Philip is one of the first, and he finds Nathanael and says, "We have found Him! We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael is skeptical, but he agrees to go along when Philip says, "Come and see."

When Jesus sees Nathanael, He has that odd remark: "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit." It's a bit puzzling to our ears in English; but as one commentator remarked, Jesus is saying, "Behold an Israel who is no Jacob." That's what Jesus comes to do: turn Jacobs into Israels, turn sinners into God's people, turn cheaters into chosen ones. How is this to be done? Jesus tells Nathanael at the end of their brief conversation: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

"Angels of God ascending and descending...": that's the language of Jacob's dream, when heaven and earth were joined by a ladder. But Jesus doesn't speak of a ladder for angels. This time, heaven and earth are joined together by the Son of Man. He stood at the top of the ladder to speak to Jacob. Now He stands on the earth to speak to Nathanael. He is in the flesh to bring heaven and earth together so that Jacobs might be Israels, so that sinners might go to heaven. This is not their work, but His. He doesn't point them to a ladder to climb. He'll climb it Himself.

This ladder has one rung, and His hands will be nailed to it. But by that cross, He opens the way to heaven for all who repent and trust in Him.

Nathanael is going to heaven, and he's going for the same reason that Jacob is. It is not that Nathanael is so righteous that he's earned it. It's because Jesus has visited him. Jesus has spoken to him, speaking his sin and deceit away. It's because Jesus gives him forgiveness and eternal life, gifts won by His suffering and death on the cross.

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The Lord still makes appearances today. That is what the Divine Service is about. This congregation here this morning is not the work of man: it is not a mixture of people who have united to pledge their allegiance to God. This is a holy assembly of people gathered by the Holy Spirit. You are gathered here for an epiphany, because the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, visits you today.

He does not veil Himself in human flesh, although He retains His human nature. Now He veils Himself in His Word. He visits at the font. He is present in the Supper. In fact, we well say that it is at the altar where heaven and earth come together, joined not by a ladder but by the Lord in His Supper: because Jesus, who sits enthroned in heaven, is also present with His body and blood here. The Lord joins heaven and earth, giving you gifts so that you might be His people forever.

These gifts are yours because Jesus visits you, gifts you and saves you.

The Lord keeps visiting: every proclamation of the Gospel and every administration of a sacrament is the Lord visiting to speak and to save. It is not just for Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights. It is given to you, throughout your weeks to speak His Word to others, to tell about Jesus, to repeat Philip's words and say to others, "Come and see."

The Lord desires all to be saved, and so the Lord desires to visit and give gifts to all. Remember our speculation at the start of the service about Roman officials visiting: who would gather to meet them? Upstanding citizens, not wanted criminals. Criminals would run and hide. Now, imagine if those officials showed up to speak an official decree of Caesar and declare that all criminals were pardoned for all crimes. There would be those criminals who believed the proclamation and came out of the darkness; but there would be those who didn't believe it and lived in hiding and died in hiding, *even though they'd been pardoned!*

That's the state of the world today: that frames all the evangelism and mission work of the Church. The Lord declares that all are pardoned – that He has died for all sins. Because you've heard this and believe it, by faith you do the most audacious thing. It's at the start of the service, marked by pastor and people trading back and forth these words from 1 John 1:8-9: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Then you have the blessed nerve to declare to the Lord how much you have failed and sinned against Him.

Do you know where that puts you? It puts you in the shoes of Nathanael in our text, to whom Jesus says, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit." By the work of the Holy Spirit and His use of the Law, you don't deceive yourself anymore about your sinfulness: rather, you openly confess it to be true. And, by the work of the Holy Spirit for the sake of Jesus, you trust that God is gracious, and that you're forgiven for the rest of your sin and deceit. The Lord visits with gifts, and the first thing you do is tell Him how much you don't deserve them; but rather than put them back in His suitcase and be on His way, He gives them. He forgives you and strengthens your faith – because the gift He most comes to give is the forgiveness purchased with Jesus' own blood!

Don't discount that faith in God's grace for Jesus' sake, because what's left if you don't believe that? God is gracious and just; if you don't believe in His grace, all that's left to believe in is His justice. Everyone knows that they're sinful, at least deep down inside. If you only believe that God is just but not gracious, then you'll naturally see God as an angry judge who is going to get you. You'll think that Christians are angry hypocrites who like to judge others too. You'll probably resent God and act rebelliously against Him and His laws.

That, I think, explains how an awful lot of the world population sees the Church today.

So what do we do? We proclaim the pardon. We proclaim that Jesus died to win the pardon and now visits to hand it out. As the Church, we preach the Law, but only so that people might hear of the Gospel, that their sins are forgiven in Christ. We're not here to tell the world to proceed to its execution; we're to stand in the place of Christ, inviting the world to skip its own funeral and proceed to an eternal wedding. We're not here to say, "Go away." We're here to say, "Come and see." We're here to say to sinners, who are cheating themselves, that the Lord has died that they might be His chosen people forever.

That's what the Lord says to you. He drew near, drew heaven close to earth by His incarnation, tearing the heavens open for you at His baptism and making the way into heaven by the ladder of His cross. He still draws near to you this day in His means of grace, pledging that He will be with you here on earth until He delivers you to be with Him in heaven, in glory, forever. Every Sunday, then, is an epiphany; for the Lord draws near to speak His Word and to give His gifts. By His presence and Word and gifts, you are His: because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen