

He Sees Us

January 21, 2024

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Will you pray with me?

Help us, calling and illuminating God, to head your life-giving words and set our hearts on your kingdom. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, Oh our rock and redeemer. Amen.

A Poem, by John Betjeman entitled: Norfolk

My Father strolled behind me, calm and slow.

I used to fill my hands with sorrel seeds
And shower him with them from the tops of stiles,
I used to butt my head into his tweeds
To make him hurry down those languorous miles
Of ash and alder-shaded lanes, till here
Our moorings and the masthead would appear.

There after supper lit by lantern light
Warm in the cabin I could lie secure
And hear against the polished sides of night
The lap lap lapping of the weedy Bure,
A whispering and watery Norfolk sounds

Telling of all the moonlit reeds around.

Our poet is reminiscing, in his middle age, about a vacation when he was a child in an eastern county of England. The Bure is both a river, and an interconnected system of waterways and lakes. It was the vacation destination of his time for the middle class- perhaps like our “up north”. Our poet also recall how his father put pressure on him to follow him into their family business of cabinet making. The young John had no desire to do so; he wanted to be a poet. That’s just a stupid dream, said his father; you’ve got to enter the family business, not only to make money, but for the family honor. You’re the fourth generation. You’ve got to carry it on. John refused, and followed his own vocation, weaving the words that came to him so freely, ending up as Poet Laureate, with a memorial in Westminster Abbey.

As Christians we have the serious task of hearing and heading the interconnected and Living Word of Jesus Christ. We have the life-long task of discerning God’s words calling us into the light of Christ and reflecting that light towards one another. As a church, we discern God’s Living Word with creativity, curiosity, and courage when we worship, work, and seek God’s presence as we follow Jesus Christ into the world to love and serve our neighbors.

When the young Nazareen prophet, Jesus, came along the shores of the Sea of Galilea proclaiming the Good News and saying “The time is fulfilled the kingdom of God is at hand” the Living Word of God burst forth upon the fisherman he encountered. Now these were life-long fisherman, maybe in

from a harvest and tending to their boats and mending their nets. In Jesus time, being a fisherman was an important and respected trade, usually a family business, the gear and knowledge passed down generation to generation. And Simon, Andrew, James and John would have had the pressures of their family honor, their vested financial responsibilities and their reputations to uphold.

You have to wonder what came out of Zebedee's mouth when James and John just dropped everything and followed some beach-prophet speaking words to anyone who would listen!

I can hear him say: That's just stupid, you've got to enter the family business, not only to make money, but for the family honor. You're the umpteenth generation. You've got to carry it on!

Well we don't know what words their father shared but I would hazard a guess they weren't ones of enthusiastic support.

But the way Mark is writing the story suggests it's not a stupid dream. In fact God is calling forth a new story, words which will be written by the disciples as their living response to poetry of the hope of Jesus Christ. Marks words are reminiscent of Old Testament stories and the larger narrative of God and God's people. 'Leave your country and your father's house', God said to Abraham, 'go the land I will show you.' And Abraham, like Peter and the others, did what he was told, and went where he was sent.

Family expectations are changed. Futures are re-arranged. God's kingdom is being fashioned. We are never too old to start over. We are never too young to manifest God's purposes. Nothing is ever so broken or poorly timed or lost that God's words cannot re-shape it into something splendid. Into something illuminating and beautiful like silver reeds in the moonlight.

Marks brief account of the beginning of Jesus ministry along the Sea of Galilee forever couples Jesus Living Words to a band of disciples. Jesus, The Living Word, shine s forth in the lives of those who not only carry his words in their hearts but live them out. Like the crocus that burst forth in springtime or groves of cadmium aspens in the fall: The Living Word shine's forth in the darkness through people who band together in community. Consequently, these few verses have wide-ranging implications for our church doctrines, the Christian life, and even the personhood and identity of Jesus Christ himself.

All are interconnected like a river of Grace we long to visit. All are illuminated by the treasured words of God.

I wonder what words God is speaking that are meant only, for you? What words have you missed or misunderstood? What divine poetry has been ignored that could be enriching- if even, a little scary for our loved ones or our honor?

A man decides he's going to travel the world and preach the word of God...

In his travels he comes across a small village. One of the villagers speaks English and so they take him in, give him food, water and shelter and in the morning, he asks that they gather to hear what he has to say.

"So", says the man "let me tell you the story of Jesus Christ." And he tells the story of Jesus' birth. "HUZUNGA!" the villagers shout, waving and cheering.

"Wow", he thinks, they really like this. So, he reads them the Gospels. "HUZUNGA! HUZUNGA!" The cheering gets louder. The man is overjoyed - he is bringing these people the gift of God and they love it. So, he reads more and more of the Bible to them. When he finishes, they are frantic. "HUZUNGA! HUZUNGA! HUZUNGA!"

Finished, he goes to see the English speaking villager who, who had been busy. "Did they like it?" the English-speaking villager asks. "Oh yes", replies the man, "they loved it. I'd like to explore the village now if that's ok, I've never seen one like this before."

"That's fine" he says, "just watch your step. We let the cows out to graze today and they leave huzunga all over the ground."

Words can be misunderstood. The Good News can go unheard. And when it comes to our loved ones or our community, we really have to be deeply careful and open to a future shaped by the unpredictable Living Words of Jesus Christ.

Somewhere between Christmas and now, calling our new Pastor Katherine, celebrating our baptismal renewal Sunday, and what has been a busy January for us in the life of this church- we missed Epiphany. We are actually in the season of Epiphany which is the celebration of God's manifestation or self-revelation to the world in Jesus Christ.

On Epiphany we celebrate the revelation of God's promise and purpose to the nations of the world, as the magi came from the East to worship to the Christ child, and God's covenant of grace is extended to all who believe the good news of Christ Jesus. The symbolism of light is important: not only because of the star that guided the magi, but as it relates to the bright dawning of God's self-revelation in Christ.

When it comes to the importance of this season of the church year, one theologian puts it like this:

God is creating the worlds; God is creating me. I am unfinished and so is the world. I can place myself within "the heavens and the earth" of God's activity and know that God is not static, God creates change, and the God who creates change in the stars is the God who changes me. When God sees you coming into being, as the self that you are, there is rejoicing in heaven. The light simply delights God. It is a sign and symbol of the one who creates the universe and us. - Angela Tilby

Like the change we see in James and John and Simon and Andrew, the Good News of Jesus Christ is meant to change us. We would be missing out to not name the importance of today and reflect upon the Living Words

God is speaking to us. Even though our shores of the Fox River are frozen, Jesus is here among us, sharing the good news, calling us to new ways of being community, providing for a new kingdom where heaven and earth are not so separate. God in Christ delights in this illumination and this light.

So, there is a wonderful tradition in protestant churches I want us to try today. It's called writing down your "Star Word". Your star word is a word that you feel God is speaking to you lately. Maybe It's something special that has been nagging on your heart for a while. Maybe it came to you during this sermon. Maybe the Spirit will whisper to you in the days to come.

So, then what you do is you take a star and write your word on it. There's stars and markers in the pews. You can do this sometime later in the service after people pass the stars down the pews- ushers also have some if you run out.

Then after the service I invite you to walk your star to the bridge. You will find a nighttime sky bulletin board- you can stick your star there. Your Epiphany star word will remain there for all of 2024. Together, our star words form the unique story of the Living Word of our community, our band of disciples, The Church of the Open Door.

I would encourage you to visit these stars whenever you need words of hope or illumination. Visit these stars to receive the Good News. But be careful, for when you visit these stars you do not know what the Spirit will do. Perhaps the Spirit will ask you to do something stupid, to throw down your nets, to pick up your poetry pens, to go out and spread the Good

News where it needs to be heard, to trust that the Kingdom of God has come near.

Oh yeah, and nobody should write “Huzunga” on their star, that was just a sermon joke- right? I mean that’s a stupid word. It means nothing and its not part of our tradition. But come to think about it, its not my place as your pastor to tell you what words God is speaking to you this Epiphany. But, you know, ‘Il hazard a guess”, that God is still speaking, and maybe what the words God says, and how they are shared, are as fantastic and the brevity of a shooting star.

Listen closely for the Living Words of Jesus Christ.

Happy Epiphany!

Amen.