

Sermon January 18, 2025 The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
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Dear Lord, May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight. Amen

As we begin a new year, we often find ourselves in a period of self-reflection filled with resolutions for change and evolution. The new year is often the beginning point for a new journey, a path toward self-improvement as we seek greater meaning and understanding in our lives.

Plato's "Symposium," is a classic of Western philosophy. In one of its most famous passages, Plato offers a haunting, beautiful idea: that we are incomplete creatures, wandering the world in search of our other halves, something or someone who can make us whole — and even, in a sense, bring us closer to the divine.

And the psychologist Erich Fromm once wrote "The deepest need of man is the need to overcome his separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness."

And many religious and spiritual perspectives frame the human experience as a "sojourner" or "wanderer" in a difficult world, seeking ultimate truth and the hope found in a higher power or a spiritual home. And in the Christian faith, Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life," and the Scriptures are a compass for those seeking direction on their journey.

The "wandering" can represent an internal exploration of one's own identity, values, and purpose. It suggests a process of growth and learning through life's experiences, challenges, and "hard seasons," where hope is found in resilience and self-awareness. A search that can be a catalyst for engaging with the world, proclaiming a message of hope, and helping others who are also searching or have "wandered from the truth". It involves sharing light and offering encouragement to those in despair.

And in today's readings we begin with Isaiah. A book begun in 740 BC, that likely dates from immediately before and immediately after the end of the 6th-century exile of the Judeans in Babylon (almost two centuries after the time of the historical prophet). Historians speculate that these later chapters represent the work of an ongoing school of prophets who prophesied in accordance with Isaiah's beliefs.

The passage includes the call to restore Israel, bring light to the Gentiles, and a messiah who must face rejection, before ultimately achieving God's salvation. This has led to diverse interpretations of this passage. The historical context here is the trauma of the Babylonian Exile, when Nebuchadnezzar II exiled Judah, leaving the Jewish people with a feeling of abandonment.

The text offers comfort and hope for their future journey. God will send a servant who will do justice, aid in Zion's restoration, the return of the Israelites to their homeland. And it promises God's enduring faithfulness and future universal mission, the promise of a restored

temple and nation, and the establishment of a New Covenant. Their exile is to be replaced not just by a restoration and return to the way things were before exile, but much more. Here, God has something much more in mind.

Isaiah presents a rhetorical arc transitioning from the subject of Israel, the nation in exile, to an individual figure, the unnamed Messiah. As Christian's, reading the passage in the present, we recognize this as the prophecy of the arrival of Jesus, the ultimate fulfillment of the passage. "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." And one of Isaiah's most famous passages, Isaiah 9:2, declaring that "the people walking in darkness have seen a great light". The "light" is viewed as Jesus Christ, providing a definitive source of hope for those dwelling in the "shadow of death".

The promise is made that Jesus is bringing a perfect resolution to human history, ending suffering, and evil through Christ's return, judgment, and the creation of a new heaven and earth where God dwells with His people. This foundational Christian belief, shapes our present life by looking forward to a future of ultimate justice, peace, and restoration, motivating our holiness and service in the present world.

And as we begin the new year, each day offers a new horizon on our journey of possibility. Not for us alone, but for the world God loves.

And in Corinthians, the journey of faith continues and includes lessons in coexistence, cooperation, and stewardship.

Paul addresses challenges to his apostleship and defends his views by stating that they were given to him through a revelation from Christ. The first section of the letter reinforces the legitimacy of Paul's apostolic claim. The thanksgiving part of the letter is typical of Hellenistic letters. In a thanksgiving recitation, he thanks God for health, a safe journey, deliverance from danger, and good fortune, followed by sage advice.

Apostle Paul's letter reached a divided church in Corinth, with divided loyalties to different church leaders. Paul rejects this disunity, telling the church members to focus on Christ. The individual leaders should only point the congregation to Christ. Urging **unity in Christ**, he challenges worldly wisdom with God's actions, and emphasizes that believers should find their identity, wisdom, and redemption *in Jesus*, not in human leaders or worldly status, calling them to boast only in the Lord.

These conflicts arose partially because of the mixed background of the church. Gentiles, Jews, and others merged in the Corinthian church, leading to conflict over dietary laws and other practices and perceptions. Jews had strict dietary laws while Gentiles did not. How could they maintain fellowship at the dining table? The Corinthians were also confused about the future resurrection. It seems that some of them were questioning whether those who had died in Christ would be raised bodily. Paul affirms that, just as Jesus rose bodily, so also will

all believers. Paul also gives the Corinthian church instructions on giving money to support ministry, and he enjoins the principle of “grace giving” vs. an obligation based on a set percentage.

Paul urges them to find a way to agree with each other and stop defining their faith by the teacher they prefer, including him. Christ is not divided. They were not baptized in Paul's name. They were baptized in the name of Jesus. All their focus should be on Christ. The core meaning is that Christ's power and wisdom can transform every aspect of church life, leading to holiness and a unified body, despite the church's internal debates and conflicts.

Paul reminds them that “you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God”. For Paul, Christ's claim on us is greater than any other group, body, or person. That is why he identifies *belonging* as being essential to unity—that the Corinthian Christians didn't “belong to Paul” or “belong to Peter” but to Christ

And in our reading from the book of John, we join John the Baptist and Jesus on their journeys. The author divides this reading into a series of events over four 'days':

1 - the day when the Jerusalem delegation met John to enquire into his identity and purpose, verses 19-28,

2 - followed by John seeing Jesus coming towards him "the next day", verse 29 and

3 - on "the next day again" he directs his own disciples towards following Jesus, verses 35-37,

4 - A fourth 'day' follows in verse 43, on which Jesus "wanted" or "decided" to go to Galilee.

John introduces Jesus as the eternal, divine "Word" (Logos) who was with God and is God, through whom all things were made, bringing life and light to humanity, and who became flesh (human) to reveal God, offering belief in Him as the path to all who want to become children of God.

Here we note Jesus' pre-existence, divinity, role in creation, incarnation (Word made flesh), and His light overcoming darkness, with John the Baptist serving as a witness to Him.

Most scholars believe, this was *after* John baptized Jesus and *after* the 40 days of temptation in the wilderness. Jesus came back to see John in his baptizing work. Many weeks probably had elapsed since Jesus received baptism at John's hands; he had been away since then, but now he is back, and John draws the crowd's attention to Him.

Previously, in earlier verses, John explained his identity to the religious leaders. Saying: “I am ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness. And clarifying why he was baptizing followers as he was not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet’.

John answered those who questioned his practices, saying, “I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.”

Now, John is even more specific in expressing Jesus' divinity:

"I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I, myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I, myself, have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God."

And in this way, John the Baptist introduced and helped create the bond between Jesus and his earliest disciples, John, Peter, and Andrew. The text does not specifically say, but the implication is that these disciples joined Jesus at John the Baptist's direction. He did not care about gathering disciples after himself. He was perfectly satisfied to have these disciples leave his circle and follow Jesus. It fulfilled his ministry.

These verses set the stage for the rest of John's gospel, by giving the reader a sense of who Jesus truly is, and why He has come.

Here we view Jesus' journey as he meets, calls his disciples, and begins his ministry. He travels from place to place informing his hearers about God the Father in long discourses, offering eternal life to all who will believe, and performing miracles that prove the authenticity of his teachings. Together, they are stronger and reach evermore people by sharing the Word of God.

By joining together, in becoming part of the flock, in unison, in belonging, the disciples have found the divine, meaning and understanding in their lives. In forming the beginnings of the church, they helped set the stage to share Jesus' lessons and welcome others into the church.

In our era there has been a great loss of faith, a loss of faith in one another, and a plummeting level of social trust. This has produced the well-documented surges in anxiety, loneliness, and a fear of emotional intimacy, especially in young adults.

We can find a restoration in our faith and good works using the Scriptures as a compass for our direction. God's healing work moves outward, always expanding toward eschatological fulfillment, "that His salvation may reach the end of the earth".

We can learn from today's lessons. As we continue our journey, let us remember Isaiah's prophecy of the great light reaching the coastlands, and the peoples from far away, illuminating the corners of the earth. Let's also remember Apostle Paul's wise advice to put aside differences, unite factions and discard petty grievances and focus on Christ's power and wisdom to transform every aspect of our lives, leading to holiness and a unified body of Christ doing good works through our actions.

And in following Jesus' journey where he meets and calls his disciples, let us learn his lessons, follow his examples, and join in a richer understanding of His message, that together in unity, we can reach evermore people by sharing the gifts of God . . . Helping others realize that they belong with God.

Our journey isn't about achieving perfection but about a process towards an open relationship with God, helping turn our own world from darkness to light.

We all realize that God's story is always bigger than ours.
May we connect our stories with God's lessons and find a way to weave them together into the wide-open future for our journey forward, into the light.