

John 1:1-9 “I Saw the Light”

Welcome to the eleventh day of Christmas! I couldn't find 11 pipers piping, but I found Josh and I'm pretty happy about that. Tomorrow is Epiphany, so if you still have your Christmas decorations up, don't feel bad. If anyone gives you any grief about it, just say, “*My Christmas celebration doesn't end until January 6!*” Of course, someone might want to say, “Well *I* try to have *my* decorations down by the New Year.” Then you can say, “I sure hope so! See, *my* New Year starts the Sunday before the first Thursday of December. But that's just how we roll in the church.”

Typically, on Epiphany Sunday, we talk about the Magi who brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the toddler Jesus after they followed a star to find him. We already talked about that last week because the lectionary gave us a good chunk of Matthew 1 to read. This week, the lectionary gives us John 1, which works out great for Epiphany too. When you hear the word “epiphany” what image comes to mind for you? The definition of epiphany is to have a sudden revelation or insight. When a cartoonist wants to illustrate this without using words, typically what symbol do they draw over the head of someone who has an epiphany? A lightbulb! When we have a sudden revelation, or an epiphany, we'll often say, “I saw the light!” Last week we were talking about how Matthew's gospel uses familiar passages from the Old Testament to help readers understand Jesus. John does this too. Except John doesn't say anything about Jesus as a child. John doesn't even start out saying anything about Jesus' earthly parents. He goes back to the very beginning ... literally. “In the beginning was the Word.” What other book in the Bible starts with the words, “In the beginning?” Genesis!

Genesis 1 is the opening chapter of the first Creation Story in the Bible. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let

there be ...(?) *light*;' and there was light and God saw that the light was good." John also uses the image of light to explain how the Divine enters the world. In his case, the light comes in the form of the "Word" ... or God in human flesh. The light of that Word shined in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it. As I mentioned last week, all four of the gospel writers deliberately used images and language from the Old Testament to help their readers understand who Jesus was and why he came into the world in the first place. For John, Jesus was God manifested in human flesh whose purpose was to bring light to the world. See, this is a *perfect* text to study for Epiphany. God's revelation: The big "a-hah!" The light bulb over our heads is Jesus.

But that's only the first half of the lesson for Epiphany. And if the first half of the lesson is, "Jesus is the light," the other half is, "What, then, is our *response* to this light?" And let's be even more specific about that question this morning and ask, "What, then, is our response to this light *in the coming year*?" Considering how we started 2020 the way we have already, I'm sure you're wondering how we should respond! Well, here's the thing ... I don't know! Lot of help you are preacher. No, seriously. That's not something I can answer for you. I can't say, "Well you know, Terry, this is exactly how I expect you to respond to this revelation." Or, "Hey, Joe ... I'm going to give you 'ten simple steps to understanding incarnational revelation' and you should be good to go for the rest of the year." That's the thing about epiphanies. They're different for everyone.

The other thing we have going on here today is that it's the first Sunday of a new calendar year. We're coming out of the two-thousand-tens and heading into the two-thousand-twenties. That's a big shift. And I mention this because we have this odd tradition of making New Year's Resolutions. We identify things in our life that may not be healthy or productive and so we make promises to kick bad habits and start good ones. I'm not sure whether that's very helpful though. Because how do we usually go about this? First of all, we don't think about these resolutions very carefully and we end up setting goals that are based on

things that we're mad at ourselves about. "Agh! I gained ten pounds! I'm disgusted with myself! I'm not going to eat carbs anymore! I'm gonna go to the gym every day, and lose 25 pounds!" Then it becomes a waiting game to see how long you can hold out before you give into temptation. Not long after that, depending on the phase of the moon, Lenten season comes around and it's time to make up a whole new list of promises you don't intend to keep. Plus there's an additional measure of deprivations that makes life even *more* miserable. All in the name of Jesus, right? Don't you just want to hop on board the Jesus train now? What if we approached the New Year differently? What if we used what we learn from Epiphany to set our intention for the new calendar year instead of just making the same old empty promises we typically make?

Here's something to think about as we face the calendar year on this eve of Epiphany - John's gospel teaches us that the Word became flesh to redeem us. Jesus the Christ came to us, flesh and blood just like us, and chose us for adoption as God's children. God's word to us became flesh. As strange as this may sound, let's ask, "How do we put flesh on our response?" How do we make our responses tangible? You see, we can speak rather glibly about the wonders of having been born again and having been adopted from our pasts into the family of God, but unless that fleshes out in some concrete ways, then it's probably just words. And God's Word is *never* "just words." The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth. Our response to God's Word begins with words, but it too must become flesh or it will become nothing. But before you panic or start feeling guilty, or think, "Oh boy, this is where we start talking about resolutions," realize that this process of putting flesh on your words is not necessarily *your* responsibility. Or at least it's not *solely* your responsibility.

We are adopted as a people, and it's *as a people* that we are to flesh out a response. *We* are the body of Christ *together*. *We* in so many ways are God's word made flesh. Individually we are only members of that body with our roles to play, but our roles are played in concert with others so that together we become the *response* made flesh ... the answering word

to God's Word made flesh. How about instead of coming up with resolutions as our first response, we instead set our intentions? How about we set our intention to develop a growing relationship with God instead of saying, "I'm going to read the Bible from cover to cover because I feel guilty that I've never done it before and I think I'll be a better Christian if I do?" And don't get me wrong ... reading the Bible is a great thing. But if you're doing it just because you feel bad that you've tried before but got stuck on the list of never-ending kings with hard-to-pronounce names, what difference is promising to read the Bible *really* going to make?

What if we worked on setting our intentions as a faith community instead of as individuals? What if we worked on creating oases of opportunity to listen to the Holy Spirit? What if we worked on loving in bigger circles by getting to know each other better or supporting each other better? How can we learn to pray collectively and encourage one another to pray individually? What if we were to work *together* on establishing more positive habits and patterns? Speaking from experience, it's a lot less difficult to join a class at the gym with a trainer than to trying to get fit all by yourself. The desire not to be the only one who fails can be what makes the difference. Why do you think AA is the only thing that works for many alcoholics? So what can we be doing to support one another in our quest? How can we make our word become flesh? Our current cultural context is one that seeks to tear us apart. We are taught to think only as individuals -- never communally. We're taught to put the highest priority on meeting our own needs. We're told that doing this will make the economy work better and be good for all of us. But even if it *does* make us rich it will destroy the fabric of the common relationships that make life worth living.

As I listen to folks in our community, I hear stories of overwhelming need. There are people here *desperately* searching for housing ... and I'm not just talking about folks we consider "chronically homeless." There are people frantically searching for jobs where they can earn enough money to buy a house because they see themselves passing

through middle-age with a lot more responsibilities but no more security than they had when they first entered the work force. There are people here anxiously seeking better medical care but can't because they're either uninsured, underinsured or there just aren't enough doctors taking new patients. These are real problems. Real dangers. Flesh and blood issues. The forces that threaten to destroy us have become flesh. At Christmas the Word of God who would give us life has *become* flesh. How are we to respond in a way that becomes flesh? Once again - I don't know what all the answers are for us, because there is no one set of answers. What I *do* know is that what's right for us will only emerge as we commit ourselves to prayerfully seeking the will of God *together*. Yes, the problems in this world and in our community are real and big, but the possible solutions are a lot bigger and wider than we're accustomed to dreaming. Maybe we need to allow our prayerful imaginations to wander a lot more widely than they ever have.

What God calls us to is responses that take flesh ... responses that are meaningful in the face of the real flesh and blood complications of real flesh and blood people. Don't let anyone tell you that all the church can ever offer is some nice religious goods and services to make you feel better and help you cope better with the flesh and blood issues of the world. The Word became flesh. The response is to become flesh. That's what we are reminded of at Christmas, and that's what Christmas means for the whole of the new decade we're entering. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, so that God's Word might continue to take flesh in us and empower us to live life in new ways full of grace and truth.