

Past Sermons

The Conversion of St. Paul the Apostle
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Salt Lake City
22 January 2006

If you have been paying attention the last few Sundays, you will have learned that Epiphany is not just one feast day, but an entire season of the church year. During this season we celebrate Christ coming as the light of the world and the various ways that God breaks into our world and into our lives. If you've been paying attention, you might have noticed how often we talk about the revelation of God as light, shining in our darkness, opening our eyes, helping us to see our way in the world. It is our metaphorical way of talking about recognizing God around us.

Epiphany is when we hear about God's glory being revealed in the person of God's son, Jesus Christ. When the three wise men, or I heard about the six wise women of St. Paul's pageant, when they followed the star to Bethlehem the light led them to the realization that in a tiny baby, God was revealing God's self in a whole new way to the world.

Epiphany is when we hear about how we, as God's people in the world, are called to respond to that revelation. The stories we hear at church in the Epiphany season are about the many creative ways in which God grabs our attention, and redirects us into the world in God's name.

Two weeks ago, we celebrated the baptism of Jesus. In that story we heard God's voice inviting people standing at the River Jordan to see Jesus as God's beloved Son. And we saw the Holy Spirit, revealed as a dove, was the sign that God was participating in the world in a new way in the ministry of Jesus.

Last Sunday we heard the story of the boy Samuel who heard a voice calling him, and not knowing whose it was, he sought out his master Eli for help. Eli helped Samuel recognize that voice as God's voice. And told him to respond to it by listening.

Apparently some of us pay attention better than others. Some of us require louder voices, brighter lights, more dramatic ways to recognize God's presence in our lives. And all of us need the help of other people to figure out how to respond to God.

Today, we celebrate the life of St. Paul. Now St. Paul required a very dramatic intervention for God to get his attention. Paul, we read, was originally known as Saul, a righteous man from Tarsus -- a man who really wanted to do God's work in the world by killing those who believed in Jesus.

The story of God breaking into Paul's life on the road to Damascus is told three times in the Book of Acts, which indicates the powerful effect Paul and his story had on the life of

the early church. His story, like stories you and I tell to different people in different settings, is told a little differently every time it is told: There is a light brighter than the sun, so powerful, that in one version, Paul and all the people around him are knocked to the ground. In one version, Paul the light is so intense that he is blinded for three days. In another version, not only is he blinded, but he's so stunned, he can't eat or drink for three days. In each version, it is Jesus himself who speaks to Paul. And in each version, Paul requires others to help him figure out what this is going to mean in his life.

For Paul, this dramatic experience of the risen Jesus was about personal identity, his personal salvation, and his personal re-direction. In this moment Paul had the chance to become who God had meant him to be; But this experience was not only about his personal conversion from Saul to Paul, from persecuting Christ to proclaiming Christ, it was an integration, re interpretation of his entire life in the light of the gospel. An experience which compelled him to receive that light and to become that light to an ever-expanding world.

The man Saul wasn't replaced by the man we know as St. Paul. When Saul had his epiphany, God used the man Saul was ---- his huge personality, his natural intellect, his networking skills, his experiences in the world and the church--- and redeemed those for work in a new direction. Once Saul paid attention to what God wanted him to do, was redirected to become Paul. God had chosen Paul to be an epiphany ñ a revelation of God's love to the world.

The Holy Scriptures contain stories of one epiphany after another. For they are a long string of stories about God working in and through people in God's world. In these stories is revealed an unbroken continuity of God's realized promise. We see this promise shining as light through the story of our creation, of God's dramatic rescue at the Red Sea, through the story of God's care of each human generation; We hear that promise through the voice calling each prophet, through the voice from the clouds at the Jordan River. It is a promise handed through the Messiah, through Paul, through each faithful generation, to us.

That promise is received by us in our gatherings as God's people, here at St. Paul's Church in SLC. It is expanded through our various ministries, as we will hear at the Annual Meeting. The promise is in the story of how we recognize the presence of God in our midst. It is the story of how God is continually redeeming our intellects, our skills, our experiences, our laughter and delight, How God continually redirects us into the world to reflect God's light. Our response is to pay attention to the story, and become epiphanies, or revelations of God's goodness.

St. Paul, on the road to Damascus, was given the chance to become what God meant for him to be --- a light to the world. Because of Paul's faithful response to God's revelation, the Good News is that with God, we always have a chance to become who we are meant to be, always have a chance to do what we are meant to do. And become the witness of God's light in the world in which we work and live and worship.

The season of Epiphany does not just celebrate God's presence in the world, but our attention, reception and expansion of it. I invite you to pay close attention, especially during this season of Epiphany. Pay special attention to the hymns we have yet to sing today and find that thread of light and promise that we are celebrating. Pay attention in the Annual Meeting to our response to God's presence. Thank God for all the ways we reflect the light of Christ in the budget, in the programs, and the people of St. Paul's Church.