

Second Sunday of Epiphany
Christ Church Episcopal 2024: Rev. Oswald Bwechwa

Today we are celebrating the second Sunday of the Epiphany season. Epiphany is a very important season in our church calendar year. It holds a very important message that we all need to keep in mind.

Unfortunately, we normally pay little attention to it. Epiphany is one of those seasons that some don't even understand. We fairly understand the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. I wonder how many understand the significance of this season.

Perhaps we pay little attention to epiphany because it comes right after Christmas. We are exhausted from Christmas festivities. We had a long shopping season. A lot of time and energy was spent on getting ready for Christmas. Clergy as well as laity need a time off. And epiphany becomes our time off. We start looking forward to the next major events of lent and Easter. But Epiphany has a very important message for all of us to keep in mind.

The message of Christmas is that the Word of God was incarnate. God became one of us and revealed himself through Jesus Christ. But the incarnation was **not a onetime event**. That is the message of Epiphany.

Incarnation is ongoing. God is not done revealing god-self. The spirit of God is hard at work revealing God-self to the world. **This is the message we hear in the epiphany season**

It is important to hear this message time and again because this is a message we tend to overlook or ignore. Do we believe that God is still revealing himself? Do we believe that God still talks to us? Maybe mentally and rationally we do believe. But how do we react when someone tells us that God spoke to them? How do we react? Be honest now!

We just listened to a story about Eli and Samuel in the first lesson. The story starts with a very interesting sentence. It says that in those days: ***The word of the Lord was rare, and visions were not widespread***"

In other words, God was rarely speaking. He was rarely involved in people's lives. Perhaps, God had done his work and there was nothing else to say. The Lord was not only **not heard**, but not **seen either**. No revelation was going on.

Eli, the chief priest, was lying in bed next to the temple, his eyesight grown dim so that he could not see. Eli represented the old guard; The people who thought that God was no longer speaking. Eli just needed to keep the tradition going. People went to the temple expecting nothing from God.

It is like coming to church this morning expecting nothing new. Coming to church not expecting to hear the voice of God. Going to church is what you do on Sundays. We don't expect to hear God speak to us.

But Eli was mistaken! **The word of God was not rare!** As the young Samuel was sleeping, he heard a voice "Samuel, Samuel". Samuel thought that Eli was calling from the other room, he jumped up and ran to him and said, "Here I am, what do you want?" Eli looks up from his nap and grumbles at him. "I didn't call you. Go lay down.

Eli does not recognize that it was God speaking. **He didn't expect God to speak to the young Samuel.** After all, he was the priest, the one with authority, the one God should be talking to. If God speaks, Eli should be the one to get the message. After all, Samuel is an inexperienced teenager! So, Eli sends Samuel back to his room to sleep.

But God calls again, "Samuel, Samuel", once again Samuel runs to his master Eli believing that he had called. Eli sends the little boy back to his room. He still didn't know that God was speaking.

It took three trials for Eli to recognize that God was calling. So, he told Samuel that when he hears the voice calling him he should not run to him but rather says; "Speak Lord your servant is listening".

This story speaks to the world we live in today. The word does not expect God to call or speak. A survey was conducted among members of the Catholic Church and found that the many of those who were interviewed reported having some mystical, or life-changing experiences with God.

But the majority of those who reported having such experiences also said they **had never told anyone about them.** When they were asked why, most of them answered,

"Because people would think I was crazy, or a Jesus freak or something."

Yes, we don't expect to hear the voice of God. Just as Eli and his generation, the word of God is rare. God does not speak to us. We live in times where people who have visions are shunned. Those who hear God speaking are cast aside as being dreamers, unrealistic, or just plain crazy.

But, from the very beginning of time, God has been a talker. Why do we have so much difficulty believing that God stills speaks today?

A story is told about our famous Reggie White. Perhaps the young generation doesn't remember the minister of defense, Reggie White. After his playing contract with

Philadelphia was done, Reggie shocked many people by choosing to play for the Green Bay Packers. When asked by a reporter why he chose to go to one of the smallest franchise cities in America he responded by saying ***“God told me to go to the Green Bay Packers”***

As you might suspected, the reporter choked a bit. But Reggie went on to say, it is acceptable to say that you have been in a deep conversation with God. You are admired as a person of prayer. But what kind of conversation does not involve a response? Prayer is not a monologue. So why do we doubt when someone who has been praying says; ***God has responded and told them something?***

Reggie had a point. Many of us are suspicious and skeptic when someone says that they have heard God speak to them. ***Because the Word of God is rare indeed, and the vision of God are not widespread.***

Epiphany reminds us that the Word has never left. The Word has never been rare. The incarnation is ongoing. I believe that God continues to speak.

From a small backward village in Tanzania, God has been speaking. Sometimes I hear his voice. Other times I don't recognize it. Sometimes I misunderstand the voice. Whether I heard the voice correctly, the fact remains, God never stopped speaking.

In many situations God speaks to us through others. Samuel needed help to figure out that God was calling him. Whether or not Samuel would have found his way without Eli is a matter of speculation.

In the gospel this morning, we heard the story about the call of Nathaniel. Nathaniel was a devout Jew who was searching for the voice of God. It took the help of Philip to recognize God. It is Philip who tells Nathaniel: ***“We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.”***

I must confess, I credit many individuals for my guidance. Along the way someone pointed me where I was being called to. Someone among you pointed me to Christ Church. Indeed, God speaks to us through friends, neighbors, teachers, strangers, or even events.

The word of God is not rare. The vision of God is not infrequent. God is not silent. Perhaps 2024 is the year to encounter God again and again. It is the year to be surprised. It is a year to be like Samuel and say: ***Speak Lord your servant is listening.***

Although God is ready to speak to us individually we can't forget that others might be messengers of God. Be on the lookout of those messengers. At the same time, you too might be sent by God to deliver a message to others. Like Philip you might be the one to direct other to Jesus. Indeed the word is not rare and the visions are not infrequent.

Amen