

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Epiphany 2 Year B
January 14, 2024

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

It has been a peculiar blessing to have been in a number of interesting roommate situations. Maybe you have had these as well.

In college, my freshman year roommate and I shared a deeply awkward phone call in mid-August to one another—each other's name and phone number the only information we had been given about the person with whom we would be living within 210 ft dorm room during a significantly formative time. As there was one phone in our family's apartment, safely connected to the wall by a very long cord, I took the call in the bathroom for privacy, as one used to do. Sarah was from Maine. The middle of it, she said. She asked where I was from in New York. *The city*, I answered, with the 17-year-old level of surprise that one could be from elsewhere in the Empire State. Silence ensued. Soo, what are you into? I asked. Herbs, poultices and homeopathic remedies, she said. How about you? Sailing and theatre, I responded. More silence.

Neither one of us knew what to do with the other. It's possible that I complained both internally and externally about living with a person with whom I had nothing in common other where we both attended school. I won't say that we figured it out after living together for nearly a year, but we did have our kindnesses—she would make me herbal teas with her mortar and pestle to help my insomnia; and I was good at bringing back pizza and chips and dips leftover from meetings or practices to share as we wrote papers into the night.

This morning we gospel-hop a bit from the Gospel of Mark to the Gospel of John, and a careful ear will hear the differences in the storytelling right away. Every second Sunday after Epiphany, we dip into the Gospel of John instead of the Gospel focused on by the lectionary, in order to pull back a bit and see the fullness of Jesus' calling through the incarnation. Epiphany season readings chronicle the revelation of Jesus in the world—from the coming of the Wise Ones, to the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan by John, and now this interaction with those who would be his disciples.

On this Sunday in the other lectionary cycles—which is to say, in the order of the texts assigned to this particular Sunday—we have the wedding at Cana and Jesus' first miracle, and John the Baptist's repeated engagement with Jesus during and following his baptism. Each of these gospel lessons highlights the divinity of Jesus—public recognition of his eternal nature through miracles, and through prophecy.

But this lection isn't about something big or notable, or public, really. Jesus, today, isn't about the grand, but about the intimate and personal experience of an eternal and existential God.

Jesus finds Philip who tells Nathanael about his experience. Nathanael snarks, either because that's what Nathanael does, or Nazareth had a certain reputation—many places do. Philip doesn't get defensive, or out-snark Nathanael, which may itself be a miracle of human restraint, but tells him to 'come and see'. Jesus greets Nathanael with a fabulous pun on his derision-clothed-as-“brutal honesty”, saying ‘here is an Israelite in whom there is no guile’—guile having its root in the name ‘Jacob’, that famous deceiver in the Old Testament, and who was yet the bearer of God's word and chosen lineage when he was renamed ‘Israel’. Nathanael wants to know how this man knew about him. And Jesus responds, “I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.” And Nathanael praises Jesus in that moment.

Much is made about any ‘decision’ to follow Christ. Or the choice of which congregation or denomination to choose when ‘church shopping’, a kind of consumeristic triumph over even the sublime. It is in our human nature to claim the power of choices about our faithfulness, our beliefs, and in this wonderfully academic university liberal leaning city, to interrogate that which we don't understand fully, or dismiss what we don't agree with totally.

Perhaps the miracle here isn't that Nathanael comes to Jesus; it's that Jesus knows Nathanael, snark and derision and all, and chooses him anyway, even before Philip found him. Nathanael isn't a hard fought, hard won, hard sell ‘win’ for Jesus as a disciple. Jesus wasn't interested in convincing Nathanael to follow him. Rather, Nathanael is known and loved and welcomed by Jesus before he says a word, because that is what God does.

Our instincts are to examine Jesus in order to find him worthy of our attention, time, influence and treasure, but in truth the opposite is our source of conviction and salvation: Jesus finds US worthy; knows us, and still loves us anyways.

And to be known fully is terrifyingly intimate, friends.

Which is why we spend a lot of time trying to not be, compartmentalizing each part of our life and being into neat boxes of where we are from, and what we are ‘into’, as frameworks for our interactions and co-existence. Those aspects do hold weight—they hold experience, they hold meaning, and they hold context—much of which informs our learned responses. My roommate's Maine, and my city living, shaped each of us in meaningful ways.

But Jesus isn't trying to co-exist with us. God in Christ loves us. The One who bridges the chasm between heaven and earth, with the angels ascending and descending in that very spot, as Jacob himself once dreamed at Bethel—which means ‘House of God’—the eternal God chooses to come and dwell here and call it holy. Even if the rest of us are secretly echoing Groucho Marx, disinclined to join any club that would have us as a member.

Jesus doesn't love us because we are easy. Or we have things in common. Or because we are good.

Which is a reminder to us when we begin to compartmentalize the people of God, or God's own self, we may be missing the mark as well.

Fast forward to 2008, and I was seeking another roommate. Craigslist at that time was best known for old couches and serial killers, so clearly that is where I went to find my next living situation. I carefully crafted an introduction about myself and sent it to dozens of potential roommates.

There were ego-crushingly few responses (I mean, what twenty-something in Cambridge/Somerville wouldn't want to live with a woman studying for the priesthood). Finally, I received one promising response. As a next step to seeing if this could work, we agreed to send one another access to our Facebook pages (the epitome of intimacy, apparently, in the mid-2000s). Ten minutes later, he wrote back, saying that he, too, had the same poster in his room that I had on my personal page: of a person dressed as Darth Vader, wading in the ocean, pouring water from a Brita filter, with the motivational caption: Sense: this picture makes none.

I like your weird, he said. Let's make this work. He attended my ordination that year. I attempted to learn about biotech from him. He asked me to officiate his wedding a few years later, and I did.

I like your weird, Jesus says to us.

Not what we have in common. Not what you think is important. Not what you want me to see, or how you imagine your best self now. What we imagine we present to God and how God sees us, is the crux—pun intended—of the revelation of a God both wholly eternal and completely personal in the mystery of the incarnation. God moves closer again and again to us, with humor and delight and curiosity, three aspects we regularly forget in our human interactions with one another. Come and see, God in Christ says to us. Come and be known, Jesus says. Come imperfect people, for you are beloved, and God wants to find you.

Amen.