

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Stillness, Work, and Mercy
Psalm 37:6, 1 Corinthians 15:58, Luke 6:27-38
February 20, 2022

Today is the final Sunday in the liturgical season after Epiphany. In early January, we began the season by celebrating the story of the visit of the magi, the wise men, to baby Jesus and the holy family. Their arrival from distant lands is seen as a sign, in the first days of Jesus' life, that his ministry was to be to all the world, the places whose names we know and the far-off places off the map. As the Gospel of John will say, "for God so loved the world." The liturgical name given to that is Epiphany, which means seeing something new or seeing something in a new way that changes everything. We remember the wise men's own epiphany as they not only followed a mysterious star in the sky to Bethlehem but also heeded a warning given to them in a dream not to return to Herod but to return home by another way. Epiphanies change us because epiphanies are experiences or moments where we see God manifested a new way.

As we end this season of Epiphany, let us ask the question one more time: where do we see God? To be clearer, the question really is: where are our eyes open to see God? Though God is invisible to our eyes, God desires to be seen and known. Ephesians prays open the eyes of their hearts, Lord, and let the light of your Truth flood in. Revealed in Jesus, manifested in the ministry of the Holy Spirit, God desires to be known by us, to be seen. The wise men traveled long distances to see Christ. When they arrived, they knelt and gave worship and glory to him. Our readings for this morning each show a way to have your eyes open to see God, here in the daily lives we live. Not just an invitation to travel around the world to meet God, to find a hidden God somewhere along the way, but where in our lives is God manifestly present to us?

I take them as three promises, or three assurances to us that God will be manifested and will open the eyes of our hearts.

In Psalm 37:6, the psalmist says, "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him." Here we see the beginning of prayer: *be still and wait*. If we will be still and wait, we will see God, in some way or another. That's a promise of prayer. But being still is hard and waiting is even harder, and don't get started on patience. Do you find it hard to be still? It's hard enough to be still in our bodies, but this is possible for those with a little bit of discipline and a little bit of age. We can more or less control our bodies. We can rest our hands; we can stop our feet; we can close our eyes. But it's then we discover how little control we have of our minds, which start galloping. And not just in prayer, but in the middle of the night. When all else is still, why is my mind churning over anxieties like it's trying to make butter. Even the patient poet Wendell Berry confesses this experience. "When I awake in the middle of the night worried about what my life and the lives of my children will be," he writes. He says he goes to lie down by the river and look up at the sky. He is trying to be still, to still the body, the mind, and the heart. This is the first act of prayer, of contemplative prayer. Be still and know that I am God. Being still means setting aside your work, like Sabbath. It means putting down your fork between bites,

actually taste your food. It means listening before you speak. Embrace boredom sometimes; don't fill it up with distractions.

For the psalmist, the situation was even more dire. It wasn't just being still to pray. It was stilling the resentments and fears and angers burning in their hearts at the apparent success of the 'wicked'. Wicked here means people abusing the system, taking advantage of the vulnerable. The psalm uses the word, "fret." Do not fret. To worry is to be concerned about what your life is becoming; to fret is to worry about what the world is becoming. Do not fret, the psalmist says, no matter how bad things look now, God is still God. The Lord is still the refuge for the suffering. The spiritual work of being still is to set aside distractions and to lay down your resentments. This is the spiritual work of prayer; letting more and more of yourself be taken up into God's mercy.

To be clear, I don't think this means we lay down our work for the good, justice for those suffering at the hands of the wicked, help those who need help, seeking goodness for the community. But it means, even when you're in the arena of action, God is made known to those whose hearts are still like calm water, like deep water. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him. God's faithful presence is with you.

—

Our reading from 1 Corinthians gives a complement to being still. This is about going to work and keeping at it. 1 Cor 15:58, "My beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

In the Psalm, we hear be still. Now we hear keep on working. Which is it? I think we already know the answer is both. Not both like a duck---a duck is still on the surface, but underneath, paddling like mad. Be still before the Lord and continue working. How do we do that? One way would be to be still sometimes and working other times. Rise in the morning to pray, then go to work. At our best that's probably how many of us can fit the two pieces together. We see Jesus doing that. Rising early in the morning to pray. Then going to teach and preach and heal in the towns all around. So that would make some sense. That rhythm—a time for stillness, a time for activity, a time to retreat, a time to engage. I think we know, though, that we see something even more in Jesus, not just a sometimes-contemplative who becomes a sometimes-active person, but an active contemplative, a contemplative actor. Our steadfast, immovable, hopeful service to God is born out of and infused with an inner stillness and confidence in God.

I think what that means is we remember we are not in ultimate control; and the one who is in control is in control of far, far more than we can ever dream or imagine, even death and life. And God works good for those whose hearts are his. This is the God, after all, the God of resurrection. When we worship the God of resurrection, we can have confidence that in the Lord, your labor is not in vain. It can seem that way sometimes, though can't it. I'm thinking of a teacher on the last day of school who feels like everything she's done all year has been wasted on those kids who didn't listen to anything she said. Or the parent who wonders what went wrong. There's someone who's trying to turn their life around, away from some addiction or from some gluttony, but they just keep stumbling and feel like giving up. I'm thinking about the

doctor whose done all she knows to do, but her patient still suffers. Life can be like this. The Greek legend of Sisyphus feels way too familiar. He was consigned to push a massive boulder up a steep hill. When he got it to the top, the boulder rolled down the other side. He had to retrieve it and push it up again and again, for all eternity. Work can seem like it's in vain.

Where do we see God? When we keep at it, trusting the God of death and resurrection with all we do, the fruit of our labor. Our work we dedicate to the Lord. Writers, keep showing up to your desk and keep writing; teachers, get your chalk and keep chalking. Social workers, keep advocating. Parents, keep on keeping on for your child. Your work is holy, and it is not in vain. You may not know now, and you may not know for a long time, but to keep at a work that seems hopeless is to take part in God's love, like the love of a father who keeps watch on the horizon for the return of his son from prodigal lands, a return that he thinks may never come. But he waits and watches for that one day when his son does come home, over the horizon, he's coming home. Be steadfast. The God of resurrection hope is with you.

Finally in our readings, we turn to the Gospel, and there meet Jesus who says: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' And that sounds like very reasonable life advice. Every religious and every philosophical system since the Greeks have set the foundation of society on a similar ethic: Treat others as you want to be treated. And that's a good place to start. We'd probably be a lot better off if everyone would do that, a sort of basic agreement to do unto one another what the other would like to have done to them. Jesus notes how accessible this is: even sinners can do this kind of basic human ethics of mutual agreement: they can love people who love them; they can do good to those who do good to them; they can lend to those who will pay them back.

Yet Jesus seems to have something else in mind for his followers, because what he says before the Golden Rule and after it does not seem remotely to do with treating other people who treat you the way you want to be treated. The context of the Golden Rule is about how you treat people who are treating you in a way you definitely don't want to be treated. In the first part, he talks about people committing insults and violence against you. He speaks of your enemies, those who hate you, those who curse you, those who abuse you. We're already way off the map of neighborly do unto others as you would have them do unto you. From a human point of view, we're getting pretty close to: do unto others *before* they can do it to you. This is the language of conflict, of oppression, of tension, of war.

And at the end, Jesus talks about getting swindled. People who want to borrow from you but not going to pay you back, people who do something against you and can only be forgiven. Goodness, Jesus pictures a people strung between those who want to harm you and those who want to take advantage of you. Of course, we already know what his first hearers would come to know later: he's also talking about himself strung up between those who want to harm him and those who will take advantage of him, and he's talking about those who will follow him in the way that he sets forth in the cross. Their lives are not going to be easy, and he's not naïve about that at all. No wonder he starts off by saying, "for those of you who are still listening to me," and then he starts, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who

curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” There’s no other way to hear this except through the wisdom of the foolishness of the cross and the strength of the weakness of the cross.

The epiphany here, the manifestation of God is not in suffering for suffering’s sake, and it’s not in the satisfaction of retaliation against enemies. We see God just where we see Jesus. The epiphany is in the way of Jesus not just in happy or benign situations where good will hopefully inspire good in others, but in the very worst situations. In other words, the place where you will meet God is where you do the merciful thing you most don’t want to do for the person you most don’t want to do it.

When Jesus says, “Do unto others . . .” look at the rest of the passage. Who are the others? They are the people, or the person, who comes in your life with a wrecking ball. The place God will be manifested is where you do what Jesus would do for the person you most don’t want to do it. It doesn’t mean everything will turn out great, and it’s not a call to suffer abuse from someone over and over. Like someone said recently, when Jesus says turn the other cheek, I only have 2 cheeks to turn. But I have two legs to walk away. So, this is a hard teaching when we try to take it seriously. But until you do, until you take it seriously, until you come to that moment in your life when you have the choice, you will not know God.

I don’t know what to tell you to expect when you do such a thing, save for what Jesus says: loving your enemy, doing good to those who hate you, blessing those who curse you, praying for those who harm you is how your eyes and heart open to know God. Because when you do, your eyes and your heart will be on Jesus.

This is the end of epiphany. Next Sunday, we go up on the mountain to see our Lord transfigured, and it is glorious. From there, we go with him through the valley in the season of Lent. Today, we have found three words to cling to on life’s journey that we may cling close to our Lord as he leads us on.

Be still.

The God of presence is with you.

In prayer, you will be near God.

Be steadfast.

The God of resurrection is with you.

In your good work, you will see God.

Be merciful.

The God of grace is with you.

In the way of Jesus, you will know God.