

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Once upon a time a young woman named Juliana became gravely ill and was expected to die. But miraculously, the medical crisis passed, and over a period of time she had fifteen visions, or “showings” during which she was led to contemplate the Passion of Christ and even converse with him. When she shared these experiences, they seemed to touch others so deeply and personally that they, too, felt the power and the genuine presence of the Lord. The young woman became known as Julian of Norwich, and in those days, nearly 700 years ago now, her name and reputation became known throughout England. She was provided humble rooms attached to the outside wall of the church in Norwich, where she would offer spiritual guidance to pilgrims both famous and infamous. Her name and her Showings live on today as remarkable, metaphoric lighthouses along the coastline where the rolling waves and tides obscure the border between the spiritual and the profane. In one such vision, she was shown a humble yet magnificent truth, and she wrote about it this way: “Christ shewed me a little thing the size of an hazel-nut, lying in the palm of my hand, and it was round as a ball. It is all that is made. It lasteth and ever shall, because God made it; God loveth it; God keepeth it.”

Each time I read that quote, I seem to get choked-up, so over the years I have adapted it as the opening for my preaching to you in the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. I may be mistaken, but I associate that ‘getting choked-up’ with the presence of the Holy Spirit, that somehow God has offered me an epiphany, a glimpse of the truth, and when it happens, I begin to pay close attention. For me, that experience opens a deep, personal line of inquiry, as it must have for Julian, and I am somehow connected again with the great and eternal mystery of faith. The season of Epiphany is meant to be a very personal one. We are called to recognize the Christ personally, both by God and by the church acting as God’s agent. We are called to know him by name and to use that name frequently as we contemplate the questions of our personal lives. ‘What should I expect from myself?’ ‘Is there mercy for me?’ ‘How can I find acceptance from those I love?’ ‘Where can I find the strength to meet another dawn?’ ‘What is the faithful thing to do?’ Such questions lurk and ferment in the depths of our souls, the questions with which we will have to go on living, the questions which can lead us to darkness when poorly managed, or to the light when shared with the mind of Christ. The season of Epiphany is meant to remind us that Jesus respects even the stupid questions, and longs to explore them with us personally.

Gale was first to notice it and call it to my attention last Sunday afternoon at the Piano Tuners’ Holiday banquet: Everyone was having a great time! Over the years, that hasn’t always been the case. There have been times when there was animosity, disagreement, disappointment, and even walking-out-early in a huff! I think perhaps doing away with the forced anonymous Christmas gift exchange might have been an improvement. That was never a really good idea! But Gale pointed out that the conversations around that large common restaurant table were being driven more by personal questions than by a need to proclaim or declare. The tuners and their spouses seemed more genuinely interested and curious than self-centered and bombastic. As I said, that hasn’t always been the case. My heart was warmed a bit as I looked about the room and saw smiles of engagement and epiphany...and it wasn’t just because Buffalo was winning their game on the screen nearby. When properly managed, questions can open wonderful opportunities for personal connections and dialogue, and God is so pleased when we muster the courage to ask them.

Our lessons today are full of personal talk. Instead of long narratives about how this character did that and that character did this, there is a lot of first and second person talk, a lot of you and me and I and we, and perhaps even a little y'all, too. In St. John's Gospel account, which we heard this morning, Jesus begins a conversation with a question. He asks the two disciples, who are standing and watching shyly, "What are you looking for?" Now there's a leading and personal question! And fumbling with a way to answer him, they ask another question, "where are you staying?" This gives Jesus the opportunity to offer them an invitation, "Come and see." And so begins the continuing dialogue, the holy relationship between God and human, the trajectory of which is the salvation of the world. It all begins, John reports, with a personal question followed by an awkward question in response. Go figure. One of the revelations of Epiphany is the personal relationship God would choose for us...with Christ and with one another. The Christmas stories we've heard again recently are narratives about an event...what led up to it and how it unfolded, but the revelation of Epiphany is that the purpose of the newborn Christ has been to grow a personal relationship with the divine.

In Psalm 40, the first 4 verses tell of the wonderful things God has done for the Psalmist, how God has been so personally kind and attentive. "He stooped to me and heard my cry", "he made my footing sure." "He put a new song in my mouth." but then in verse 5, the author turns to God and uses first-person singular to speak of their personal relationship, "Great things are they that you have done, O LORD my God! how great your wonders and your plans for us". "you have given me ears to hear you." Even though God is naturally invisible and inaudible, God has given the psalmist a way to see and hear. Perhaps the disciples realized that when they met Jesus, the full visible and audible expression of God. Perhaps that was their first and foremost epiphany. The psalmist responds to the gifts of God, the invitation to be in relationship with the Eternal, by answering, "Behold, I come." "I love to do your will; your law is deep in my heart." It is personal; it gets me choked-up.

Paul was in a loving, but sometimes complicated relationship with the small congregations he planted throughout the Mediterranean basin, and in this letter to the Corinthians in Greece from which we heard this morning, he has written to them about matters both universal and personal. This is the opening to his letter, his greeting to those whom he hasn't seen recently. It's all 'I and You' language, and one of the ways to read scripture is to imagine that the author is writing or speaking directly to you. So, when Paul writes 'I give thanks to God always for you', take it personally. When he writes, imagine that he is writing, indeed, to you, his pen-pal, when he says 'you are not lacking in any spiritual gift ' and "Christ will strengthen you to the end!" and that Paul himself, the Apostle, is wishing personally "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." You are my personal companion, and God is *our* Father, and when we may meet again around that common table, whether it be in Corinth, in your parish hall, or in some random restaurant, we will be able to share some awkward questions.

Now, the language in our passage from Isaiah is a bit more complicated. The conversation is more difficult to track. This portion of the Book of Isaiah contains what has been called 'the servant song', and just who that servant might be is a bit confusing. Is it Isaiah? Is it Jacob, or the nation of Israel? Is it Christ, who will not be born into human form until some 500 years later? Scholars have debated this confusion for centuries. But let's not allow that confusion to obscure the light of our epiphany; let's take advantage of the confusion and assign ourselves the identity of that servant, saying "The Lord called me before I was born... in the shadow of his hand he hid me." And let's take God's response personally, "I will give you as a light to the nations, so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." When God asks some question like "whom shall I send?" may each of us push the intimate dialogue forward with a follow-up question, something like "Is it I, Lord?" Amen