

CE—Holy Name-B
January 1, 2006

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE

Exodus 34:1-8; Psalm 8;
Romans 1:1-7;

Luke 2:15-21

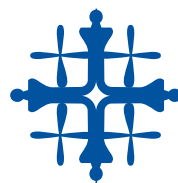
¹⁵When the angels had left the shepherds and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. ²¹After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

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Synthesis CE

A Lectionary Study Guide in the Episcopal Tradition

INTERPRETATION

Above All Names

You shall call his name Jesus ...

The lectionary for today focuses on the importance of a name, specifically the Holy Name of Jesus. Names carry power, and acts done in the name of Jesus become a revelation of God's presence.

When Christmas falls on a Sunday, the Feast of the Holy Name of Our Lord coincides with the First Sunday after Christmas, and thus supercedes the regular Sunday observance. Falling eight days after Christmas, this feast day was originally called the Feast of the Circumcision, since Luke tells us that on the eighth day after his birth, Jesus was circumcised and given his name.

Except for verse 21, the Gospel text for today in Luke 2 overlaps the optional verses (15-20) of the reading appointed for Christmas Day, in which the shepherds responded to the message of the angels that *a child who is Savior, Messiah, and Lord* had been born.

They made their way to Bethlehem, where they found the child in the manger. With the angels' words confirmed, the shepherds spread the Good News to others, who responded with amazement.

According to the requirements of Mosaic Law, three ceremonies are to follow the birth of a male child: circumcision (Lev. 12:3); redemption or dedication of the firstborn (Ex. 13:12-13; Num. 18:15); and purification of the mother (Lev. 12:2, 4, 6).

Genesis directs that, as a sign of the covenant between God and the nation of Israel: "Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old" (17:12).

Thus, through circumcision, the Messiah gains solidarity with humanity and becomes subject to the Law—that is, the Messiah is both "born of a woman" and also "born under the law" (Gal. 4:4). However, Luke is more concerned with the naming of Jesus, and this is the only place in the Gospels that describes this event.

In Matthew 1:21, Joseph was told in a dream that he was to name the coming child *Jesus*, "for he will save his people from their sins." In Hebrew the name *Jesus* means *savior* or *deliverer*. When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, Gabriel too declared that the baby was to be called *Jesus* (Lk. 1:31).

Thus, in naming the child *Jesus*, Mary and Joseph are obedient to God and follow the requirements of their ancestral faith, which include the purification of Mary and a dedication sacrifice for a first-born child (Lk. 2:22-24).

Names in Scripture have great meaning as an indicator of who an individual is and what that person is called to do. Mary and Joseph did not name this child; the naming was part of God's unfolding plan of salvation. Thus this simple obedience on the part of Mary and Joseph was used for the glory of God, as this child grew up to fulfill his vocation as *Savior*.

The Feast of the Holy Name reminds us of the salvation Jesus brings to us and to all generations. It is his name that we bless and uphold in all our liturgy and worship. We affirm that God the Father also hears us, and that *we too* are sons and daughters of God through Christ our Lord.

The opening verses of Paul's letter to the Romans is a further statement of the meaning of the name *Jesus* as well as a summary of the Gospel. First, Paul identifies himself as a servant of Jesus Christ and an Apostle charged with the proclamation of the promised Gospel.

Here we learn that Jesus was a son of "David according to the flesh" (1:3), and the Son of God through the "spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead" (v. 4). These two verses form a creedal statement about the earthly and Divine nature of Jesus.

His connection with the royal Davidic line fulfills Jewish messianic expectations (2 Sam. 7:11b-16); and he became the Son of God by his Resurrection.

Through Jesus we receive grace and are called to win the obedience of the Gentiles; the promises of God to God's chosen people are now extended to all through Jesus' Resurrection—all "for the sake of his name" (v. 5).

The passage from Exodus calls attention to an earlier instance of the implications of a name when God proclaims the Divine name and its attributes to Moses. After the apostasy of the golden calf (Ex. 32), the tablets of the law were broken, symbolizing the severing of Israel's covenant with God. But God acts to restore the covenantal relationship by commanding Moses to cut new stone tablets.

Moses is then to present himself on Mount Sinai alone. The "Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, 'The Lord'" (34:5).

What follows in verses 6b-7 is a statement of the nature of God, with words found throughout the Old Testament (Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 103:8, 17; Jer. 32:18-19; Dt. 5:9-10) reflecting Israel's understanding of God and God's acts.

The covenant can be restored because the Lord who has chosen Israel is *merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and*

abounding in kindness and faithfulness. God's steadfast love is extended to the "thousandth generation" (v. 7)—forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin. However, those who are guilty will not escape justice (v. 7).

But whereas God's mercy is extended to a thousand generations, the consequences of iniquity is limited to three or four generations. This speaks to the Lord's compassion, but it can also be understood within the context of Israel's sense of corporate, rather than individual, responsibility. The good that an individual did brought good to the entire family, tribe, or nation; and likewise, sin brought suffering.

In verse 8, Moses' response is one of awe: "Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped." He goes on to pray for God's pardon of Israel's sin and continued presence among them.

God is always greater than our idea of God can ever be, and the Lord's steadfast love endures forever.

Lane Denson III has written in his email column "Out of Nowhere" (Jan. 1, 2004):

"On the First of January in the very middle of these twelve days of Christmas, the church keeps a day whose symbol, indeed, whose icon is for Christians perhaps second only to the cross.

"We call it the Feast of the Holy Name. It recalls for us that this child of manger and miracle became through his flesh a son of the Old Covenant. And it recalls that through his naming as Jesus, he became a symbol and bearer of the New. Thus Jesus is a name above every name that, like the cross, anyone can use or misuse, but that is always rendered superficial until we can read through and beyond it, until we can read behind the symbols.

"... In and through the historical Jesus, there is shaped the discovery of the Christ of faith and the possible reconciliation of all humankind. Through the icon of his holy name and his identity with it is revealed the profound irony of the Word made flesh, Christmas. But Christmas, like anything else that ever happens, including you and me, enters history through this peculiar event and its peculiar people with whom we share our lives."

*Jesus is to us
a name
above every
name ...*

IMPLICATIONS

1. We read in the Gospel passage that the shepherds left their fields to "see this thing that has taken place" (Lk. 2:15). What might they have been thinking as they approached Bethlehem? What do you think they expected to find?

2. Verse 18 tells us that as the shepherds shared their experience with others, "all who heard it were amazed." As we read the familiar words of the Nativity narrative, how does this story continue to be amazing for us today?

3. In a sense, the shepherds were the first evangelists. During this Christmas season, as well as throughout the year, what can we do to proclaim the birth of the Messiah?

4. In verse 19, we read that "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." What do you imagine

she might have felt and thought on the night Jesus was born, as well as in the years to follow?

5. As you read the Collect for the Holy Name of Our Lord on page 162 or 213 of the Prayer Book, reflect on the importance of names and naming. What does the name *Jesus* tell us about who he was and the nature of his ministry?

6. What is significant about your own name? What does your name say about who you are as a person?

7. When we pray, we often pray "in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord." Read the words of Lane Denson III as well as the other Lessons appointed for today, and reflect on the power of the name of our holy Lord.



CE—Epiphany 1-B
January 8, 2006

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 42:1-9;
Psalms 89:1-29;
Acts 10:34-38;

Mark 1:7-11

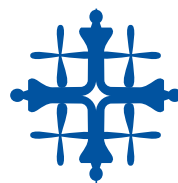
⁷*John the baptizer proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." ⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

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INTERPRETATION

“I Have Put My Spirit Upon Him”

I have put my spirit upon him ... (Is. 42:1). These words of the Prophet Isaiah set the tone for this first Sunday of Epiphany, which always focuses on the Baptism of Jesus. As the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his Baptism, he was thus empowered to live out the ministry for which God had chosen him.

Verses 1-4 of the Old Testament reading comprise the first of the four “Servant Songs” of Second Isaiah. Although the exact identity of the servant is not made clear here, Jewish exegetes have taught that the servant figure was a personification of Israel, and the sufferings described are those of Israel’s Exile.

Here the prophet assures Israel that despite its captivity in Babylon, the nation will be empowered by God’s Spirit to bring justice to the furthest coastlands—with persistence, quiet humility, and compassion.

This will come to pass through God the Creator, who gives life to all. Israel has been called in righteousness to be “a light to the nations” (v. 6b)—to bring illumination to a world held in the darkness of captivity. Thus the servant Israel provides an example of true service to God.

For there is no other god but the Lord, whose glory is not to be given to other deities. Now what was foretold will come to fruition. God is about to do *new things* in the world (v. 9), and proclaims them here before they come to pass.

Over time, the Christian community came to identify the servant with the life and ministry of Jesus. In today’s Gospel passage, the Lord’s Baptism and the revelation that accompanied it are a *manifestation* of Isaiah’s “new things”—and a declaration of what Jesus will bring to the world.

But before this event can occur, Mark introduces John the Baptist, who proclaims that his own service to God is to be the forerunner for a greater figure—to prepare the way for a ministry that would surpass his own.

Mark describes John as an Elijah-like figure who came out of the wilderness calling for repentance and baptizing those who came to him. Yet he claimed that he merely baptized with water, but the one to come “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (v. 8).

It would not seem that Jesus would need to be baptized, yet he came to John and was baptized in the Jordan. This event was to bring forth a greater revelation from God for which John’s own witness was the preparation.

Jesus had no guilt to wash away, but by this Baptism he identified himself with the spiritual needs of humanity. As Jesus came up out of the river, he was empowered with the Holy Spirit.

The notion of a spirit from God who could take possession of a person had a long tradition in Israel. Patriarchs such as Joseph, judges such as Samson, kings such as David, and prophets such as Ezekiel all had known what it meant for the Spirit of the Lord to come upon them.

But these were chosen individuals upon whom the Spirit descended in order to enable them to accomplish specific God-directed tasks. Yet the Scriptures also held a hope for *something more*.

The Prophet Joel declared that a time would come when the outpouring of God's Spirit would extend to all people. On that day, God promised, "... I will pour out my spirit on all flesh" (Joel 2:28-29).

Such an outpouring of the Spirit could have been what John had in mind when speaking of Jesus as the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. This ultimate gift was about to be made available to the whole nation.

The one "more powerful" (v. 7) than John was now being revealed. And John was to share in the special anointing that would initiate the ministry of the Messiah.

In the Gospel of John, the Baptist witnesses the descent of God's Spirit in the form of a dove (Jn. 1:32) as Jesus is baptized. The other Gospels are not explicit as to whether Jesus alone perceived the event, or whether it was observed by John or others present (Mt. 3:13-17; Lk. 3:21-22).

At that moment, Mark maintains that Jesus "saw the heavens torn apart" (v. 10); whereas the accounts of Matthew and Luke say that the heavens were opened. This stronger language is characteristic of Mark and also reminiscent of the words of the Prophet Isaiah: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down" (64:1). This also foreshadows the rending of the temple veil when Jesus was crucified (Mk. 15:38).

There was a further attestation of the Divine presence at this event. In words that echo the Second Isaiah passage for today, a voice from heaven proclaimed, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (v. 11b). These words will be repeated later at the time of the Transfiguration (Mk. 9:7).

What is made evident in Mark's brief account is that the Lord was now fully equipped for his ministry. Through him God's Spirit would be poured out among all people. Mark does not say so, but the other Gospels indicate that the Baptist already knew the identity of the person soon to be revealed as God's Messiah. All the Gospels imply that for the brief time of the Lord's ministry, the total activity of the Holy Spirit was *in and through Jesus*.

In the Resurrection we see the fullness of the salvation he offers. Then, through the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost,

those who received the Spirit became channels through which the Gospel message was spread abroad. Thus this Spirit-filled community continues Christ's work in the world.

The witness of the Apostle Peter gives further indication of the purpose and power of the Baptism of Jesus. Through a vision (Acts 10:9-16), Peter had become convinced that God shows no partiality. In every nation, any person who honestly seeks to live a life of faithfulness will be accepted by the Lord.

In the passage for today, Peter summarizes the Gospel message and ministry of Jesus as he speaks to the household of the Centurion Cornelius, the first Gentile to be baptized.

God's message of peace through Jesus has spread throughout Galilee and Judea, beginning with the Baptism of Jesus in which he was anointed with the power of the Holy Spirit for his ministry: "He went about doing good and healing ... for God was with him" (v. 38).

Through Baptism, we too are empowered by the Holy Spirit for our ministry as God's servants. Along with Jesus, we are God's beloved and will be sustained and supported for all time.

H. King Oehmig has written:

"With the anointing of the Spirit in baptism, we are infused with the sacred. The consecrated life begins. What does this life look like?"

"The baptismal life is a *yielded way of life* that began when we were drowned in the baptismal waters, and rose resuscitated in the Spirit. What was left floating in the font after we were dried off, and marked with oil as 'Christ's own forever,' was our indecision, our unbelonging. Being left out or uncommitted, after our baptism, is no longer an option. The decision for Christ—or rather, Christ's decision for us—becomes the first new thing in the re-deemed life of grace, while everything else, though important, becomes secondary.

"Baptism, therefore, puts life in proper perspective. We have, following our commitment, but one purpose: *to bring Christ forth into the world*.

"Baptism is the sign of our identification with our Lord, a visible and tangible affirmation that binds us to him and to each other. We show forth that connection when we renew our baptismal vows in community, at each individual baptismal ceremony."

Our own baptism calls us by name, and calls us as God's children.



IMPLICATIONS

1. Imagine that you are a witness to the events in the Gospel passage. How would you describe what happened to someone who was not there?

2. Why do you think Jesus was baptized by John? How do you imagine Jesus might have felt as he came out of the River Jordan following his Baptism?

3. What was the significance of this event for the life and ministry of Jesus? Refer to the reading from Acts 10:34-38 as a part of your discussion.

4. How do you think John might have felt as he baptized Jesus? What was the significance of this event for the life and ministry of John?

5. In the final verse, Jesus is identified as God's beloved Son. How do you know that you too are beloved by God?

6. In Mark 1:8, John the Baptist proclaims that he baptizes with water, but that one coming after him will baptize with the Holy Spirit. How would you explain the difference between baptism with water and with the Spirit? Also refer to Acts 19:1-7 as a part of your discussion.

7. Refer to the service of Holy Baptism, beginning with Concerning the Service, on page 298 of the Prayer Book; as well as the quote by H. King Oehmig in the Interpretation section. What happens when we are baptized? What is the significance of your own baptism?



CE—Epiphany 2-B
January 15, 2006

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE

1 Samuel 3:1-10 (11-20);
Psalm 63:1-8;
1 Corinthians 6:11b-20;

John 1:43-51

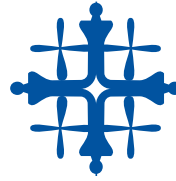
⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

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INTERPRETATION

God's Call

During the season of Epiphany, we look not only at the manifestations of *Jesus as God's Messiah*, but also at *living out the promises of our Baptism*. Today's passages focus on the response to God's call.

We read first today of the boy Samuel being called to be a prophet of the Lord. Samuel's birth was the answer to the prayers of his mother Hannah, who had been barren. She promised to dedicate her son to God's service; and thus Samuel served Eli, the priest at Shiloh. Eli's own sons were "scoundrels" who had "no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people" (1 Sam. 2:12-13).

Samuel was called during a time when seeing visions and hearing the word of the Lord was rare. We read how Eli was lying down in his room, and Samuel was in the temple where the Ark was. The Ark was a portable shrine and symbol of the presence of God. When the Lord called Samuel's name, the boy assumed that it was Eli, and went to his bedside, as "Samuel did not yet know the Lord" (3:7). After the third time, Eli realized that the Lord was calling Samuel, and told him to answer, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (v. 9).

The words Samuel receives are a *rejection of the house of Eli* for the transgressions of Eli's sons—for which Eli himself is partially responsible, since he did not reproach them. The Lord tells Samuel that the words he is about to hear will make his ears tingle (v. 11). So in the morning Samuel is afraid to answer Eli's questions about his vision. But Eli urges him to hold nothing back, and Samuel tells him everything.

Eli unquestionably accepts Samuel's word as the will of the Lord (v. 18). The old order of the priesthood had become corrupt and would be replaced. However, Eli himself was devout and obedient, and his acceptance of Samuel's words was marked by deep faith.

Samuel was called to be the Lord's prophet to all of Israel from Dan to Beer-Sheba; and the Lord "let none of his words fall to the ground" (vv. 19-20). According to tradition, Samuel was a 12-year-old boy when this incident occurred. This passage illustrates that a call is not dependent upon a previous relationship with God. The Lord knew Samuel would respond, since a call comes through Divine initiative. Later, Jesus would tell his disciples, "You did not choose me but I chose you" (Jn. 15:16).

In the Gospel passage we read of how Philip and Nathanael accepted the call of Jesus to become disciples.

The brothers Andrew and Simon Peter had already committed themselves to Jesus (Jn. 1:35-42). As Jesus traveled on to Galilee, he saw Philip and issued an invitation to him as well: "Follow me" (v. 43). Phillip then went to Nathanael and declared that he had found the one about whom Moses and the prophets wrote: he is "Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth" (v. 45).

Nathanael is mentioned only here and in John 21:2; his name means "gift of God." His initial response to Philip is one of skepticism. "Can anything good come out of

Nazareth?” (v. 46). Nazareth was an insignificant village in Galilee, not mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures; the expectations for the Messiah were focused on the Davidic city of Bethlehem. Later on there would be further attempts to discredit Jesus on the basis of his origins (Jn. 6:42; 7:52).

Philip continued to urge Nathanael to “Come and see” (v. 46). There is no substitute for the direct witness of another believer. As Nathanael approached, Jesus declared him to be “an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” (v. 47).

Nathanael was incredulous that Jesus could possibly know anything about him, and thus confessed Jesus as *the Son of God* and *the King of Israel*. Jesus then proclaimed that Nathanael would see even greater things: “You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man” (v. 51).

These verses recall the Old Testament story of Jacob, who wrestled with God at Penuel. There he received the new name of *Israel* (Gen. 28:10-22).

Up to that time Jacob’s behavior had been marked by deceit. He had misled his old, blind father in order to obtain the blessing that belonged to his elder brother. The new name God conferred on him signified a major change in his life. Jesus’ words to Nathanael here identify him in direct contrast to Jacob.

This story reveals the ability of Jesus to see the true nature of individuals, apparently a function of supernatural insight. From the moment of Nathanael’s appearance, Jesus saw him as a man of integrity. Jesus told Nathanael that before Philip located him, he saw him under the fig tree, a favorite meditation spot.

By revealing his omniscience, Jesus startled Nathanael, and no more was needed to convince him that Philip was right: *Jesus was the Messiah*—even though he was from Nazareth. He thus immediately confessed Jesus as “Son of God ... the King of Israel” (v. 49).

The passage closes with the reference to Jacob’s dream at Bethel, where the angels ascended and descended upon a ladder (Gen. 28:12-15). This is symbolic of the “greater things than these” (v. 50) that the believer can expect after accepting Jesus’ call to discipleship.

To Nathanael, and indeed to all true disciples, heaven will be opened more clearly than in Jacob’s dream. The link to God will no longer be an inanimate ladder to be climbed. The Lord’s

disciples will have as their link to the Kingdom *the Messiah*—who will himself be the “ladder” joining heaven to earth.

To be called by God is to live in a manner worthy of that calling. Thus in the first letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells his converts that they were sanctified and justified by the Lord Jesus Christ, and warns against dishonorable behavior.

No one can earn status with God, so external rules cannot define a person’s life. Yet something that may be lawful may prove less than beneficial if it comes to control one’s existence. Since we have been adopted as God’s children, our physical bodies have been made a part of Christ, and are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

In warning against sexual misbehavior, Paul reminds the Corinthians that stewardship of the body must not dishonor the presence of God’s Spirit or express disloyalty to Christ, to whom we belong. Our entire being, body and soul, was redeemed through the self-giving of Jesus: “For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:20).

Bruce Larson, the former executive director of Faith at Work, was always fascinated by the way life-changing truth could be communicated person to person. So he conducted an experiment. He asked literally hundreds of people, in small groups and individually, this two-part question: *Who has had the greatest influence on your life, and why was that so?*

This is what he found:

The person frequently named as the one who *most influenced others*, though in some way a superior, always treated the other as an *equal*. He or she didn’t provide a *service*, but rather was a *friend* and a *servant* in the relationship.

Second, in these stories that were told, the influential person was *genuinely interested* in hearing what the other had to say. This represented an unfeigned, sincere concern for the person’s well-being.

Third, the influential persons were vulnerable and open about their own weaknesses. They were honest, and in that honesty they asked for the other’s help. They were not stingy receivers. They themselves had needs and expressed their neediness openly. They were not self-satisfied saints.

Larson maintained that these traits were shared by the kinds of people who were most able to be effective agents of Christ in sharing the good news.



IMPLICATIONS

1. As you read the Gospel passage, concentrate on the words and actions of Nathanael. How would you describe him, from the information we have about him here? How is he changed by his encounter with Jesus? Why do you think he acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God (Jn. 1:49)?

2. In verse 46, Philip urges Nathanael to “Come and see.” What, specifically, do you think Philip wanted Nathanael to see?

3. Philip led Nathanael to Christ. As you read the words of Bruce Larsen in the Interpretation section, who are some of the people who have helped you grow in your own life in Christ?

4. In this passage we see the effectiveness of the direct witness of one believer to another. How would you share the “good news” of Christ with someone who was not familiar with

the life of Jesus? What are some of the barriers that sometimes make it difficult to share our Christian faith, and what can we do to overcome these obstacles?

5. Read the Old Testament Lesson for today in 1 Samuel 3:1-10 and compare the call of Samuel with that of Philip and Nathanael. How and when have you heard God’s call to you?

6. The Gospel and Old Testament passages for today focus on listening to God’s call to us; while the Epistle in 1 Corinthians 6:11b-20 outlines the responsibilities of living out such a call. How does Paul call us to honor God with our entire being?

7. What are some of the implications for effective evangelism—as well as responding to God’s call—found in the passages for today?



CE—Epiphany 3-B
January 22, 2006

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 3:21—4:2;
Psalm 130;
1 Corinthians 7:17-23;

Mark 1:14-20

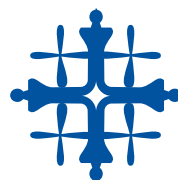
¹⁴Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” ¹⁶As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” ¹⁸And immediately they left their nets and followed him. ¹⁹As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. ²⁰Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him.

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Synthesis CE

A Lectionary Study Guide in the Episcopal Tradition

INTERPRETATION

Repentance and Reconciliation

The readings for this third Sunday of Epiphany continue to focus on *response to God's call*; but today we are reminded that repentance and reconciliation are also a part of such a call.

Beginning from 627 B. C., Jeremiah served as the Lord's prophet for forty years. During this time he called the people to return to observance of God's teachings, and foretold of the downfall of Judah if the people did not repent. Jeremiah witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple of Solomon, and the beginning of exile in Babylon. But because he believed in God's redemption, Jeremiah chose to stay in Jerusalem to offer encouragement for the rebuilding of the nation that he knew was to come.

In the passage for today, Jeremiah calls for the people to remember God and repent. “Return, O faithless children, I will heal your faithlessness” (3:22).

Jeremiah portrays “Israel's children” as weeping on the bare heights, lamenting the fact that they have forgotten to follow the way of the Lord (v. 21). The call here is for them to return to God so that their faithfulness may be restored.

When the prophet speaks of those who seek salvation from the hills, he is thinking about pagan worship performed in the “high places,” practices that denied Israel's God. Yet, despite the sin and shame of which he speaks, the prophet presents God as calling upon Israel to return, to abandon the worship of pagan gods. “Truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel” (3:23).

In verses 24-25, Jeremiah calls for the people to confess their sins; he is confident in the restoration of blessings to the people if they will refrain from worshiping idols—“remove your abominations from my presence” (4:1)—and take an honorable oath in the name of the Lord. By once again living in faithful obedience, they will receive the Lord's blessing.

The call of the first disciples in the Gospel of Mark also begins with a call for repentance and an announcement of God's Kingdom. After the Baptism of Jesus (1:9-11) and his subsequent time of temptation in the wilderness (vv. 12-13), Mark's account continues with a short statement about the arrest of John the Baptist (cf. Mt. 4:12-17; Lk. 4:14-15), to mark the shift in focus from John's ministry to that of Jesus.

Now in Galilee, Jesus proclaims the “good news of God” (v. 14): *the time has come and the reign of God is at hand*. Jesus has appeared and overcome Satan in the wilderness, and God's power is at work in the world. God's time has been fulfilled with the coming of Jesus, and *in him the Kingdom of God is at hand*.

The response to Jesus' announcement of the coming of this good news is to be *repentance and belief in the Gospel* (v. 15). To repent is to turn around, to reorient one's life to God. To believe in the good news is to have trust and faith in *what God has done and now promises to do*. Verse 15 provides a summary statement of the main

focus of the ministry of Jesus. For Mark, Jesus IS the Gospel.

As the passage continues, the calling of the first disciples illustrates the compelling nature of the good news that Jesus brings, as four fishermen leave everything behind to follow him. First Jesus calls the brothers Simon and Andrew, and soon thereafter, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Ordinarily one would not expect commercial fishermen to leave their boats and livelihood. Nor would the sons of Zebedee leave their father in the care of hired servants—unless they were convinced that the person who called them had valid claim on their total lives.

Jesus' call to Andrew and Simon was, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people" (v. 17). They were to turn their attention from fish to people—to round up a human catch in a metaphorical net. They were being asked, dramatically and suddenly, to risk everything and turn their efforts to a completely new profession.

Their call was to be fishers of souls, to pluck others out of their ordinary lives and challenge them to the same life of faith and service that they themselves risked.

Commercial fishing in first-century Palestine was done with a seine net in which large quantities of marine life would be trapped. When the net was hauled in, the catch was sorted, and what had no market value was thrown back. In Jewish Galilee the dietary laws forbade eating anything that did not have fins and scales. Thus a noticeable percentage of the catch had to be classified as worthless and discarded.

No such fishing technique was available for people. These new disciples were leaving behind their familiar lives and accepting unknown risks and trials.

However, Jesus' proclamation called for repentance and *belief*. Even though there is no reference to prior contact between Jesus and these men, Simon, Andrew, James, and John believed in what they were being called to do. Evidently Mark wanted to convey the thought that *when Jesus calls, disciples must be prepared to leave what they are doing* to take up the higher call.

This passage shows that when we receive God's call, we bring with us to the Lord's service whatever skills and talents we already possess. We also receive new empowerment. We

can only respond to God's call in the moment, and in that response, in that action of love, we put our first foot forward on the path of discipleship—from which there is no turning back.

A call to follow Jesus involves the responsibility to conduct one's life in a manner that makes the best advantage of that call. Thus Paul reminds the community in Corinth that conversion does not require a change in present circumstances, but rather making the best use of who and what we are. "However that may be, let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you" (1 Cor. 7:17).

For example, there were those in the congregation who were circumcised; but that in itself did nothing to secure or prevent acceptance by God. Those who were of Jewish ancestry and circumcised were not to renounce their heritage or try to efface the mark, but to live out their vocations in that status. Likewise, those who were Gentiles should not try to become Jewish. In God's sight, one condition was as good as the other. What was truly essential was obedience to God's commandments.

There were other questions of social status, since some of the converts were slaves. But in Christ, the distinction between slave and free had no significance. For those adopted by God, earthly limitations were absorbed into a greater freedom. Having been bought with Christ's blood, they could not be slaves to any human ordinance.

Becoming a disciple of Jesus is not dependent on any aspect of earthly heritage or external circumstances. Whatever our present condition, we are called to make the most of it for the glory of God. "In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God" (v. 24).

C. S. Lewis has written:

"Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms. Laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realizing that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again from the ground floor—that is the only way out of a hole. This process of surrender, this movement of full speed astern, is what Christians call repentance."



IMPLICATIONS

1. As you read Mark 1:14-15, what is the "good news" that Jesus proclaims here?

2. Jesus also called for repentance (v. 15). Refer to the words of C. S. Lewis in the Interpretation section and discuss what you think Jesus means when he calls us to repent and believe.

3. Jesus says that the Kingdom of God has come near. How would you describe this Kingdom? What evidence of the Kingdom do you see in your own life and in the world today?

4. In this passage, four men radically changed their lives in order to follow Jesus. Try to imagine what it might have been like for them to make this decision. What do you think Zebedee might have thought as his sons left to go with Jesus?

5. What were some of the risks as well as the hopes involved for Andrew, Peter, James, and John as they responded to the call from Jesus? How have you responded to the call of Jesus to "follow me" in your own life?

6. Jesus told his new disciples that they would now "fish for people" (v. 17). As you think about this metaphor for evangelism, what is involved in fishing for people?

7. In the Epistle for today in 1 Corinthians 7:17-23, Paul tells the Corinthians to make the most of their present conditions to serve the Lord. How do you serve God in the daily circumstances of your own life and work?



CE—Epiphany 4-B
January 29, 2006

TODAY'S SCRIPTURE

Deuteronomy 18:15-20;
Psalm 111;
1 Corinthians 8:1b-13;

Mark 1:21-28

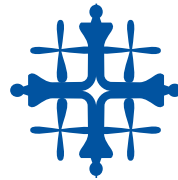
²¹Jesus and his disciples went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

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Synthesis CE

A Lectionary Study Guide in the Episcopal Tradition

INTERPRETATION

The Holy One of God

After Jesus called his first four disciples (Mk. 1:14-20), he traveled to Capernaum on the northwest side of the Sea of Galilee, where he would center his activity. The events of Mark 1:21-34 depict a typical day in the ministry of Jesus that begins as he goes to teach at the synagogue on the Sabbath.

When the rural shrines were closed and the offering of sacrifices was restricted to the Jerusalem temple, the synagogues became the focus of local religious life. Early in his ministry, Jesus often taught in the synagogues (1:39; 3:1); but after his rejection in Nazareth (6:2f), increased hostility led him to teach his disciples privately or address crowds in the open.

But in this instance the people were "astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (v. 22). This was a common response to Jesus in Mark's Gospel (cf 1:27; 2:12; 11:18; 12:17). He spoke with personal authority rather than relying on precedents from earlier generations as the scribes did.

The scribes referred to here composed official documents, and often functioned as lawyers (12:38-40) and government officials, as well as interpreters of the Scriptures (9:11; 12:35). Along with the elders and chief priests, the scribes were among the most adamant opponents of Jesus (2:6, 16; 11:27-28).

Mark tells us here that Jesus' authority was further manifested in an encounter with a man possessed by a demon or "unclean spirit" (v. 23). This is the first of four exorcisms described in the Gospel of Mark (cf 5:1-20; 7:24-30; 9:14-29), and follows the typical pattern of such encounters.

The terms *unclean spirit* and *demon* are often used interchangeably in Mark (3:22-30; 7:25-29). *Unclean* here is used in the sense of *opposition to what is holy* rather than in an immoral or ritual purity context. Jesus, as the one who is filled with God's Spirit (1:9-11) and baptizes with the Spirit (1:8), is set apart from the man with an unclean spirit.

First, the possessed man attempts to resist the power of Jesus as he cries out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God" (v. 24). The man was not in control of his own actions, and even the words in his mouth are not his own.

As Mark presents the story, the Lord's true significance is always perceived by the spiritual powers. Only human beings who choose to rely entirely on their own capacities fail to perceive Jesus' actual nature. The title "Holy One of God" in reference to Jesus is used only here and in Luke 4:34 and John 6:69 in the New Testament, and denotes one who is *consecrated by God*.

Jesus at once commands the hostile spirit to be silent and depart from the man whose life it controls (v. 25). The immediate departure of the unclean spirit is accompanied by convulsions and loud cries.

Once again the crowd responds with amazement: “What is this? A new teaching—with authority!” (v. 27). The fact was, not only did Jesus teach with authority, he displayed that authority to cast out the most powerful forces poised against him. His word announces the *coming of the reign of God*, and calls sinners to repentance. Here Jesus is a figure of power and mystery, and thus his fame begins to spread throughout Galilee.

Although presented as Moses’ final instructions to the Hebrew people entering Canaan without him, the Book of Deuteronomy was actually composed over several centuries, with final editing around the time of the Exile. The central purpose of the book was to underscore the provisions of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. This was especially important as Israel faced the challenge of identity in a foreign land.

Here Moses promises the people of Israel that God will send another prophet when he is no longer with them: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet” (18:15).

Moses reminds them of the meeting at Mt. Horeb when God spoke to Israel and gave them the commandments (Dt. 5:23-24; Ex. 20:18-21). The people were frightened by such direct contact with the Divine and needed Moses as a mediator between them and God. Thus the role of the prophet grew to convey for the people the transcendent purposes of God.

The people are to heed all true prophets, as it is the Lord who puts words in their mouth. If they do not, they will be held accountable to God for their disobedience. Likewise, any prophet who speaks on behalf of other gods or falsely speaks in the name of the Lord will face death.

The prophets claimed great authority that often brought them into conflict with the rulers and the priests, whose re-

sponsibilities were also defined in Deuteronomy. The early Christian community would see the promise of a prophet such as Moses fulfilled in Jesus.

The issue at hand in the first letter to the Corinthians is whether it was permissible for Christians to eat meat left over from sacrifices to pagan idols. Some in the community (the strong) argued that, since there is only one God and one Lord, Jesus Christ, idols do not really exist, and this meat may be eaten. Others in the community (the weak) *did* believe that the idols were gods, and were troubled by eating meat from sacrifices.

Paul’s advice is that it is better for those who understand that idols do not exist to refrain from eating such meat rather than encourage others to do what they believe is wrong. But the real issue here is not about the meat itself. It is about the strength of the community: “Food will not bring us close to God” (8:8a).

It is love that binds the community together, and concern for others takes precedence over individual freedom. It is a sin against the members of the community as well as Christ to lead others to actions against their conscience (v. 12).

There will always be conflict, but we are called to take the viewpoints of all members of the community into consideration and to ensure that our actions reflect Christ’s love. “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (v. 1b).

Jesus’ own words were backed with love and also with action. John Stott has written in *Basic Christianity*:

“The value of Christ’s miracles lies less in their supernatural character than in their spiritual significance. They are ‘signs’ as well as ‘wonders.’ They are never performed selfishly or senselessly but are illustrations of moral authority. They are in fact the acted parables of Jesus. They exhibit his claims visually. They are his works which dramatize his words.”



*Jesus’
miracles are
“signs” as
well as
“wonders.”*

IMPLICATIONS

1. The Gospel passage describes the first public teaching and healing in the ministry of Jesus as recorded by Mark. Imagine that you are an eye-witness to these events in the synagogue. How would you describe what happened? What are your thoughts and feelings about these events?

2. Jesus is described here as one having authority. How was this authority made apparent? What is the source of Jesus’ authority?

3. Who are those who speak with authority in our own time? From what source(s) is their authority derived, and how is it manifested?

4. The text tells us that Jesus did not teach as the scribes taught. How was his teaching different? How can we in the

Church today be more effective teachers of the Gospel message?

5. The man here is described as being possessed by an “unclean spirit.” How is it that this spirit recognized Jesus as the “Holy One of God” when no one else did? How are we able to recognize and acknowledge the holy in our midst today?

6. Mark tells us that the people were amazed by the actions of Jesus. As you read the quote by John Stott in the Interpretation section, what is the role of miracles (such as the exorcism in today’s passage) in the ministry of Jesus?

7. Read the Epistle for today in 1 Corinthians 8:1b-13 and discuss the relationship between knowledge and love in the community of faith.

