

“Epiphany Sunday”

John 1:1-5, 14-18

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Guest Minister

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From the Pulpit

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The Gospel: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

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Consider for a moment the sheer volume of words that assault us each day: text messages, e-mails, podcasts, print media, television, radio, and yes, the words of the person next to us. To an introvert, assault seems to fit. Amid the noise and clutter, breathing room is hard to find. Advertisers annoy us with fast-paced graphic images and meaningless jingles that get stuck in our heads. Politicians shock us with personal attacks, name calling, and bullying. To defend ourselves, we desensitize ourselves and listen selectively. We become

suspicious of words and speakers – unless they say what we think we want them to say.

Now think about another kind of word – a respectful word, a believable word, a word that solves dilemmas, gives right directions, brings life, a trustworthy word, a word that makes a difference because it is true, authoritative, and powerful enough to change a situation and alter circumstances. Inevitably we begin to hunger for a Word of compassion. Overwhelmed by the intensity of flashing media, exclusive sound bites, it's easy to miss seeing or hearing the understated or overstated words of God.

Each gospel writer shares their accounts of Jesus' life, ministry, and teachings. Mark, the first of the gospels to be written, is fast-paced and begins with John the Baptizer proclaiming Jesus as the anointed one of God. Mathew begins with genealogy and goes on to expand the work that Mark had begun. We turn to Luke for the beloved story of Jesus' birth. Luke tells of Jesus' activity and journey to Jerusalem. John, the philosopher, begins with metaphor. An imagination is required to understand what he is saying. John gives us Jesus' "I am" statements. "I am the word, light, bread, way."

The reason these differences are significant is because they contribute to how we understand Jesus and his role in our faith. For example, those who gain their insights about Jesus primarily from Mathew and Luke tend to be belief-centered – understanding particular facts and beliefs about Jesus, God, and the Bible. Those who identify with John's writings tend to be way-centered – following Jesus on a path of transformation. The transformational path sees the Bible as memories and testimonies of those who traveled with Jesus, with liberal amounts of metaphor. My understanding of the gospels tends toward metaphorical more than literal meanings. The reader and I become responsible for interpreting and applying the words.

From the gospel of John, Jesus is the Light of the World. He is not literally light, but he provides light in the darkness of tragedy or despair, enabling us to see what has been hidden from our sight. Jesus is the Bread of Life. He is

metaphorically bread that can satisfy our spiritual hunger. John reports Jesus saying, “I am the gate.” He is not literally a gate or way, but he is the path to a new kind of life. These metaphors of light, bread, and way urge us toward transformational change.

Transformational change is more than skin deep. Like metamorphosis, it involves a change of appearance, and more importantly an inner change – a change in understanding. A change of heart that causes the spark of divinity in you and me to shine through.

Today we celebrate Epiphany, a word that means revelation. Today’s gospel is the beginning of John’s revelation of God in action, creating, revealing, and redeeming. *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* John goes on to say that Jesus is the Word - eternal, personal, and divine. His are words that are life-giving. This Word is timeless and infinite, and in Jesus the Word becomes a specific force for creative transformation.

Both Genesis and the gospel of John start with, “In the beginning.” John suggests that the word made flesh existed from the time of all creation. This Word, this spirit of love was blowing over the face of the waters. In those early verses of Genesis, the world is transformed from chaos to order. In John, the creative transformation is Jesus’ priority of love and relationship that can transform us from chaos to order. In the beginning there existed the Word of God, Compassionate, All-Merciful God with us.

In this week when we saw endings and beginnings, celebration and tragedy, it seems fitting that we remember the words of former President Jimmy Carter, a man who was transformed by the Word of God. In his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, he shared:

I am not here as a public official, but as a citizen of a troubled world who finds hope in a growing consensus that the generally accepted goals of society are peace, freedom, human rights, environmental quality, the alleviation of suffering, and the rule of law.

The bond of our common humanity is stronger than the divisiveness of our fears and prejudices. God gives us the capacity for choice. We can choose to alleviate suffering. We can choose to work together for peace. We can make these changes – and we must.

As Carter suggests, we do not have to look far to see where transforming love can open our minds and hearts to the needs of the world. “God gives us the capacity for choice” – we can choose to be transformed to a life of love. “We can choose to alleviate suffering.” Until we make that choice, instruments for peace and productivity will be weaponized for harm. Let us make that choice – as individuals and as a church community.

At First Congregational Church, Columbus, Ohio, we are in a time of transition and transformation. Seasons are changing; the calendar is changing; our church is changing. Things are not as they were. There is a letting go of what has been familiar and leaning into a less-known future.

In the beginning there was a word. In the beginning of 1st Church there was a word that this church shall be established to bring justice to all people – no matter what their skin color, their country or family of origin, their declaration or denial of faith, no matter what their economic condition. This word was rooted in the teachings of Jesus to feed the hungry, care for the sick, and provide for the poor.

So, what is the word for us today? I can only say we are listening intently for that word.

Our Transition Team continues to guide our time of change. Listening Circles will resume soon, because we all benefit when you and I add our voices to the process. We will continue to consider how our history, both personal and congregational, contributes to our joys and conflicts. We will continue to listen for the creating, revealing, and redeeming Word of God in our individual lives so that we may discern where God is calling our church. Next week we will officially welcome Rev. Becky David as our minister and

guide through this time of defining and redefining our ministry. At the end of our discernment time, we will search and call pastors to lead our ministries. May this be our beginning! May this be a time of not only transition, but a time to become transformed by the Word of love announced by John's gospel.

This is my prayer for us: May we have courage to endure what is difficult. May life's challenges bring us closer together and may we always be able to turn to each other. May we be filled with spiritual grace. Open our hearts to hear God's blessings, the encouragement of our friends, the support of our family, and the bond of love that unites us all. Amen.