

Second Sunday after Epiphany, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
January 19, 2020

Perhaps you can relate to feeling a bit out of step with something going on around you. Maybe you've been in a meeting where everyone was nodding vigorously, and you find yourself in complete disagreement. Or it might be that your friends insist you see a movie or a play, and you can't figure out what all the fuss is about. Or, and this happened to me the other day, some homeowners in my neighborhood were canvassing to stop something being built that I happen to think was a pretty great idea. It can be a strange feeling to be out of step with your peers, your friends, or your tribe.

After four years, I think we know each other well enough that I can confess that I've never felt quite as holy-priestly as some of my colleagues seem to feel. Even back in seminary, we were constantly going on retreats where we would renew our baptism vows and remember that we were walking on holy ground. We'd take off our shoes and walk through labyrinths and pray all the offices of the day. I used to quip that we remembered our baptism so often in seminary that I never had a chance to forget it properly. It's not that I don't like to be still and pray. It's more that I like it for about twenty minutes, and a lot of my friends could pray for days if given the opportunity.

So, in my twenties, I developed a sense that perhaps I was doing my faith wrong. And maybe you can relate to this: for other people this Christian life with God seemed to come more easily or readily. Maybe they were more holy or more focused or somehow better connected to God Almighty. One of the quirks of the human experience is that we can only and ever be ourselves and never be anyone else. But we can spend a LOT of time wondering about the interior life of other people. And, if you're anything like me, I just assume that other people are doing this God stuff with much more reverence than I was able to muster.

One of the great joys of getting older is realizing that no one knows what they're doing--least of all when it comes to a relationship with God. Or, maybe that is too harsh. It might be better to say that everyone has figured out their path to the Divine in a way that suits their temperament, gifts, upbringing, and vocation. We have Marthas. We have Marys. We have Pauls. We have Jameses. We have Deborahs and Judiths and Isaiahs and Timothys. If those names don't mean a lot to you, you can ask me after services, or I can recommend the Deacon's Wednesday Bible study. My point is that there are as many ways to be faithful to the Lord God as there are people sitting in this room. Ian cannot follow God the same way as Ginny and vice versa.

I think it was about eight or nine years ago when I realized that I will never be much of a monk. But here's the thing: monks are really bad at fundraising and administration. And those monasteries are old and expensive. Maybe God needs the gifts that I have just like God needs those people who find themselves drawn to a life of prayer. In my slightly wiser middle age, I've come to understand that God knows our gifts and uses the best in us to work out God's vision for this world.

Which brings me to the scripture from Isaiah this morning. In it, the prophet composes a poem or a song of love to the tiny tribe of Israel after they have been forcibly removed from their homeland and cast into the diaspora. The people no longer have access to their great government or religious buildings, and their cultural identity is being buffeted by the mighty nations that surround them. What kind of word of compassion is the prophet supposed to give to a broken people?

It's not quite the message you might expect. Isaiah reminds the people that they were chosen by God to be a light to the nations. The prophet plays with the poem, and it's not always clear if he's talking to a singular person who is supposed to be a servant to the people of God or if he is talking to an entire nation who is supposed to be servants to the people of God. But I think this is why Isaiah uses poetry rather than prose. The poetry can handle that kind of ambiguity.

It's as if the prophet was simultaneously speaking to the parish of St. Mark's but then also speaking individually to each one of us. And the prophet is saying that — no matter your circumstances — you are designed to be a messenger of God in your time and in your place. You are designed to be a light to the nations. And in fact, God has known you and all your particularities since before you were born. And God is going to need the very particular things you have to offer. Maybe you're a mystic. Maybe you're good with a spreadsheet. Maybe you can sing. Maybe you can't. It doesn't matter. God is going to need all of it.

I take great comfort in that, and I hope you do as well. God is not calling me to a monk. God is calling me to be Ian — with Ian's particular gifts and talents — working with the great community of faith to be a light to the nations. God is not calling you to be some inconceivable thing that you are not. God is calling you to give your gifts to the holy enterprise that is right here and right now. God is calling us, in the words of N.T. Wright, to bring hope at all levels. Relieve the suffering of this world. Use your power to make our systems more just and more in keeping with God's dream. Clean up the mess in the place you find yourself working, and join arm in arm with your friends and family. The prophet is calling us as individuals, and the prophet is calling us as a community to be a light to the nations. How that looks is going to vary, but the shape of the candle doesn't matter. The radical grace is this: God knows you intimately and calls you anyway, warts and all. Because God has seen you and found you utterly worthy to be about God's business. So, to paraphrase the prophet Isaiah: hop to it. Amen.