

When Did Jesus Know?

A Sermon for Every Sunday, January 21, 2016

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Luke 4:14-21

Today is the third Sunday after the Epiphany, which may mean nothing to some of you. Just a few years ago it would have meant nothing to me. I didn't grow up in the kinds of churches where they paid attention to such things. But I have come to appreciate these seasons of the liturgical year almost as much as I appreciate the seasons of the calendar year. The season of Advent for instance—which is a time of waiting and preparation—gives way to the joy and celebration of Christmas like children waking up to find the first snow of the year on the ground and school called off for the day. The season of Lent—those forty days of prayerful penitence—gives way to the glad exuberance of Easter like icy winter gives way to the flowers and fragrance of spring.

Epiphany is not a season in itself. It is just a day—January 6—that has been chosen to commemorate that moment when Jesus was first revealed for who he really was. The word *epiphany* means “to shine upon,” and we usually talk about the visit of the wise men, and the starlight shining down from above. But in these Sundays after Epiphany the light begins to shine brighter and brighter on Jesus. Through what he says and what he does his true identity is revealed more clearly. I've compared it to one of those dimmer switches on the wall that you dial up brighter and brighter from the visit of the wise men to that moment when Jesus stands on the mountain of Transfiguration, his clothes and appearance dazzling white, so that the disciples have to squint to look at him.

Every Sunday after Epiphany we dial that dimmer switch up a notch. This year, on the first Sunday after, we heard the story of Jesus' baptism, and how the Spirit

descended on him like a dove and a voice said, “You are my son.” On the second Sunday after Epiphany we heard the story of how Jesus turned water into wine, and how his disciples saw it and believed. The light shines brighter upon him, and more and more people begin to figure out who he really is. But here is the question I want to ask today: when did Jesus know who he really was?

There are those people who would argue that he always knew who he really was, and the Gospel of John would support that kind of thinking. “In the beginning was the Word,” John tells us, “and the Word was with God and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” The Jesus in John’s Gospel always seems to know exactly who he is and who he was and who he will be. Not only that, but he seems to know where he came from and where he is going. Much of this, of course, is John’s answer to those skeptics who were saying that Jesus was “just a man.” Christians don’t believe that Jesus was just a man, but they do believe that he was fully human as well as fully divine. If he was fully human, is it possible that he came to an understanding of himself in the same way we do—slowly, over time, and not all at once? Would Jesus have been fully human if he had told his mother at the tender age of two: “It’s not going to be easy, Mumsy, being savior of the world and all”?

There is that intriguing story from the Gospel of Luke, the second chapter, where the boy Jesus is discovered in the temple debating with the religion scholars. When his mother scolds him for disappearing without telling anyone he says, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” It sounds like one of those, precocious, self-conscious answers, doesn’t it? As if Jesus knew all along what the rest of the world would only figure out later? Then again, he may have

only had that vague awareness that when he was in the temple he felt somehow, strangely, at home. Like some of you who grew up in this church probably feel here. Regardless of what Jesus may have known about who he was and who his father was I would like to consider the possibility that his first real epiphany came to him in the synagogue in Nazareth, as recorded in our Gospel reading for today.

It happened after Jesus had been baptized, after he had heard the voice of God whisper in his ear, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” It happened after he had spent forty days in the wilderness trying to figure out what it meant to be the Son of God. It happened after he had been tested by Satan, and found himself more than equal to the test. It happened after he had left the wilderness of Jordan and come up into the green hills of Galilee, full of the Holy Spirit. He came to Nazareth, his own hometown, and on the Sabbath day he went to the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
Because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To let the oppressed go free,
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Isa. 61:1-2; 58:6).*

And then he sat down to teach. Everyone in the room was looking at him, waiting to hear what he would say. He took a deep breath and announced: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

That’s the whole sermon. Which is one of the reasons I believe that while the truth about who Jesus was and what he had been sent to do was becoming obvious to others, in this moment, in that synagogue in Nazareth, it became obvious to him. Did he

sit down to teach because it was the custom of the day or did he sit down because he found that, suddenly, he needed to? Did the truth of what he had just read make him weak in the knees? “The spirit of the Lord is upon me,” he had read, and it was! Luke says that it descended upon him in bodily form, like a dove. That he went into the wilderness by its power and that now he had come up into the Galilee full of the Holy Spirit. “Because he has anointed me,” Jesus had read, and that was true, too. In the same way Samuel had poured oil on David’s head to identify him as the new king of Israel God had poured Holy Spirit on Jesus to identify him as the Messiah. “To bring good news to the poor,” Jesus had read, “release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, liberty to the oppressed—to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor!” In a flash of insight his mission had suddenly become clear to him: he was the Lord’s anointed, and he had been sent to do all these things! He had to sit down for a minute, and when he did he said to the crowd, in a voice full of wonder, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

I may be making too much of one sentence here, but listen to it again. “Today,” Jesus says, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” When was it fulfilled? That very day. Where was it fulfilled? In that very place. What Jesus seems to be saying is that right then, right there, that scripture had found its fulfillment in him, that in one, dazzling epiphany he knew who he was and what he was supposed to do. I think I would have to sit down too.

I was telling someone not long ago about my own sense of call, and how it came upon me gradually. There was that telephone call from my pastor, who asked me if I would consider serving as part-time minister of youth. “Sure,” I said. I liked kids. I had

some free time. Before I knew it I was standing there In front of a group of teenagers trying figure out what a youth minister was supposed to do. But little by little and with some good advice from my pastor I began to feel comfortable in that role—part-time youth minister. But then he took me out for a steak dinner one night and asked me if I had ever considered pastoral ministry. “No!” I said, shocked. I had never thought about that at all. But after he brought it up I began to think about it. And when he went to teach a workshop at the seminary he invited me to go with him, and I did, and asked all the students I met when and how they knew they were being called to ministry. They didn’t have many good answers. “Mostly just a feeling,” they said. “A sense of rightness about it.” I wanted more than that. I wanted an epiphany—blinding, dazzling—one that would knock me off my feet. I didn’t want a *feeling*.

I went to the beach for a few days with my wife, Christy. We went to celebrate her graduation from college but while I was there I was also struggling with this question of call. How would you know if you were? I had brought a book with me to take my mind off the question, a big, thick book called *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein. It’s a work of science fiction, about a man from Mars named Michael Valentine Smith, who works a few small Martian miracles and then becomes a kind of Christ figure in the story. Disciples gather around him, and eventually begin to urge him to take some action, to do what he has come to do. Again and again he tells them, “Waiting is.” Until the day comes when he gathers them together and says, “Now. Today. The waiting is over.”

That’s the kind of thing that happened to Jesus in his hometown synagogue. All those times he had come to that place waiting for his mission to become clear to him had

been fulfilled in a strong, clear sense of call. It's the kind of thing that happened to me after I got back from that trip to the beach. On the very next Sunday I was sitting in church wearing khaki slacks and a Madras plaid jacket when a young woman named Debbie Belew stood up to play a song on her guitar (That's how long ago it was. Madras plaid was still almost in fashion). I can't remember what the song was, but I remember that as she was playing I began to have the distinct impression that the question I had been asking had found its answer, and the time I had been looking for had arrived, and the waiting I had been doing was over. When the invitation was given I stumbled down the aisle and mumbled something about *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and "the man from Mars," and "Waiting is." But in the end I choked out the news that my wait was over, and I was ready to answer the call to ministry.

I tell you that story partly to remind you that epiphany can come any time, anywhere, but also to remind you that it can come during a service of worship, as you sit there in the pew, surrounded by the people of God, conscious of the presence of God. The light can grow suddenly brighter, and you can see clearly what you could not see before: who you are, and what you are meant to do. It can make you suddenly weak in the knees. You might stand to sing a hymn and find that you need to sit down for a little while. But when you stand up again you may stand up more sure than ever of what it is God has called you to do, and how you will answer.

—*Jim Somerville* © 2016