

*Epiphany Sunday*  
*A Vision, A Promise*  
Isaiah 43

I read the other day a story of a missionary who was assigned to the island of Yap, which is an island in Micronesia, in the Pacific Ocean. When he got to the island, the first thing he had to decide was where to live. One of the people who lived there took the missionary to two places on the island where he might build a house. One was on a very quiet and isolated section of the beach, with a beautiful view of the lagoon. It looked like just the dream spot he had imagined in his fantasy of life in the south seas.

The other place was right in the middle of a row of houses. All the missionary could see when he got there was unattractive to him: crowded, litter, empty cans on the ground. All he could hear was the noise of children playing outside, morning to night. It had everything that middle class Americans try to avoid: noise, litter, lack of privacy, strange people all around. He chose the beach. But his guide, who was a wise person, said to him, “If you want to learn to speak our language, the other place is better for you.”

If I imagine God as a person who has conversations with himself, I would guess that there might have been some thoughts like this missionary’s before God came to us in the baby Jesus. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling place among us,” the Gospel of John says. The story of our faith is of a God who chose *not* to live on an isolated, peaceful, beautiful mountaintop, where he could observe things from a distance and write beautiful, wise words. Jesus was born into the noise and bustle of a small town, full of poverty and conflict and over-full recycling containers. God chooses *now* to live among us, with our littered lives, stubborn ways, mixed-up intentions. Our not understanding one another, our incomplete and imperfect attempts to be a community that loves one another the way God imagined creation was supposed to look.

But learning to speak *our* language was that important to God. Living in community is right at the center of what God hopes for us, what the kingdom of God on earth looks like. I’m talking about *real* community, where we listen to one another until we understand stories and thoughts that are quite different from our own. *Under-stand*, which means, quite literally, to *stand under* one another, learning from each other’s ways, knowing that each of us has grown up in a culture that is just *one way* of doing things, not the *right way*.

What we are trying to do here in this church—to live in community that includes and *enjoys* different cultures, to be led by people who do things in unfamiliar ways—is hard work. Not everyone can do it; even organizations that say they are committed to diversity are mostly unwilling to do more than accept the presence of people who are different from the ones in charge. And, frankly, we have not done it yet. We have work ahead of us. We have not yet been in one another’s homes, or shared our stories and our struggles, our hopes, our wisdom, with someone who might not understand right away. I cannot think of any work that is more

valuable or important for this church in the days ahead. This is the work that will make God smile. This is the work God will be in with us.

There was once a monastery that looked a little like many churches I know. It had fallen on hard times. Its buildings used to be full, but by the time of this story, it was almost deserted. There was only a handful of old monks in residence. They still served God, but they did it with heavy hearts, remembering what they used to be.

Nearby, in the woods, an old rabbi had built a little hut. He would come there from time to time to fast and pray. No one ever spoke with him, but whenever he came to his cabin, the monks would know, and they would whisper, “The old man is here.”

One day the abbot—the head of the monastery—decided to visit the rabbi. After the morning worship service, which of course was very small, he set out through the woods. As he approached the hut, the abbot saw the rabbi standing in the doorway. They hugged each other like long-lost brothers.

They sat for a while and talked. “My monastery is dying,” the abbot said. “What can I do?” The rabbi began to weep, because he understood. The abbot began to cry too. For the first time in his life, he cried his heart out. These two grown men sat there like lost children. They filled the hut with the pain and tears they shared. After a while, they were quiet.

And then the rabbi said, “I will give you a teaching, but you can repeat it only once. After that, no one must ever say it aloud again.” And then he looked straight at the abbot and said, ‘The Messiah is among you. I know this.’ For a moment, both of them were silent. What can you say when something so profound has been spoken?

The next morning, the abbot called his monks together. “The rabbi said something very odd,” he said. “I can only say this once, and then we must never speak of it again.” He looked at each of them, one by one, and then he said, ‘The rabbi said that one of *us* is the Messiah.’ And of course the monks were as startled to hear this as the abbot had been.

“What could this mean?” they asked themselves. “Is Brother John the Messiah? Is it Matthew? Or Brother Thomas? Am I the Messiah?’ They were all deeply puzzled by the rabbi’s teaching. No one ever mentioned it again. But as time went by, the monks began to treat one another with a kind of reverence—to *act* as though any one of them might be the Messiah. This made them gentle with each other, warm-hearted, care-full. They prayed together as people who were waiting for something else, but they began to live with each other as people who had already found what they were looking for.

After a while, visitors who came to the monastery would find themselves deeply moved by the life of these monks. Word spread, and before long people were coming from far away to experience for themselves the love and reverence in which the monks held each other. And then, young people began to ask how they could become a part of this community, and the community began again to grow.

I have called you by name, you are mine. [Isaiah heard God say]

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you. (Isaiah 43:1-2)*

God has said this same thing to each of us. Whether it is a civil war you have come through or a fight with someone in your family, you have walked through fire. Whether your struggle has been with your own depression or illness, or with immigration authorities, you know what it means to have walked through waters over your head.

And you have been saved. The water did not rise up to drown you; you have arrived safely on this side. Your God says, "I have called you by name; you are mine." My God has said this to me; my God has said it to you too. I think that makes us sisters and brothers. Look around the sanctuary for a moment and fix your eyes on someone who seems, on the surface, very different from you. You can look at the back of their head, as long as you make a mental note to notice their face later. It's OK to turn around in your seat. You don't both have to be looking at each other. But look hard at that person for a moment. Imagine that this is a person who God treasures as much as you have ever imagined or wanted for yourself. This person is known as deeply and intimately as you know yourself. This is the person God needs. This person may be the one who can carry God's presence into the world, if only you will nurture her gifts, his spirit.

The Messiah is among us.