

Where does God show up for you? Sometimes for me it is seeing the sun break through the sea smoke as I head over here in the morning. Sometimes when I make a visit to a household or hospital bed. Sometimes it is simply communicated in the touch of a hand or voice over the phone. The reading from Isaiah and the gospel of Mark are tremendously different from one another but they help us to give voice of how we mark God's activity in our lives.

The passage from Isaiah is grand in its' vision and offers a litany of the wondrous attributes of God. *Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is bigger, and stronger, and more impossible to comprehend than you can possibly imagine!* The God described here seems to embody absolute power. Most people imagine God as big.

By contrast, Mark's focus seems almost an afterthought. If Isaiah paints the story of God's nature and work on the largest of canvases, Mark focuses on a simple, single detail. Very early in his account of Jesus' life and ministry, Mark tells the story of the healing of a woman, unnamed except that she is identified as Peter's mother-in-law. I feel like we are eaves dropping on an intimate scene. And though it is brief, it is far from simple. Mark's construction of the scene – and particularly the detail that, once recovered, the woman serves the male disciples – has been a source of frustration to many of us as it has functioned across the centuries to reinforce the notion that the woman's role is not to lead but to serve.

I find in Mark's more intimate portrait two elements that are immensely helpful as I try to understand the nature of God's work in the world and our lives and hopefully it will us all better recognize and participate in it God's ongoing work.

First, the very large God Isaiah describes is not above caring for us as individuals. And like the prophet, Jesus too has a grandiose task. He announces the coming kingdom, calls together his disciples, and cast out demons – and all of this in the first chapter! – and he also slows down to care for a woman suffering a fever and then to tend, one by one, *all* those in the region who were ill or possessed and came for his help. Sometimes, we too can feel that our seemingly relatively small problems are not worthy of the attention of the God who tends the cosmos. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Secondly, the mighty God whose praises Isaiah sings is at work, unrelentingly and without tiring, to sustain the cosmos, strengthen the weak, and restoring those who have fallen. The most frequent way God does this is by working through those all around us. When this woman serves after she is healed, she is neither being dismissed as somehow inferior to those she serves nor constrained to a lesser role. Jesus has not only healed her, he has given her back her vocation which is, ultimately, a picture of discipleship. Service is *the* picture of discipleship.

A little later in Mark's story, after James and John have asked Jesus to put them in places of honor and authority (and after the other disciples get angry because of their arrogance), Jesus offers his disciples a lesson in greatness that aligns quite closely with the actions of this woman:

So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:41-45).

So where do we look to trace the actions of the God who "sits above the circles of the earth...and stretches out the heavens like a curtain"? By looking to the everyday acts of service, care, and

sacrifice we see all around us. Which means that our seemingly ordinary lives can become at any given moment the arena for the activity of the Holy One of Israel as God continues to love and bless the world... through us! And we have the opportunity this week to help someone see, hear, and believe this. Do we even dare say, *“Have you not seen? Have you not heard? The Lord God almighty is at work in you, with you, and through you to care for the people and this world God loves so much.”*

My role today is to do more than just to remind, cajole, or educate, but also to promise: to promise that God is and will continue to work through us – all of us, women and men, young and old, of sound mind and body as well as those who struggle with illness or disability – and that God will do marvelous things through us. Each of us has the opportunity to feel the creative, healing, and restoring hand of God and, just like this unnamed disciple, respond in service.

The season of Epiphany is about exploring and celebrating the many ways in which Jesus makes God’s abundant life visible in the world. Epiphany means, “showing” or “manifest” and during this season, I often bless you with these words, “May Christ, the Son of God, be manifest in you, that your lives may be a light to the world...”. That’s my prayer for you and for me.

The Rev. Paul Briggs
The Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany
4 February 2024
St. Thomas’ Church, Camden, Maine