

Rev. Lynne Ogren
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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
2nd Sunday after Epiphany, Year B
Psalm 139:1-18; John 1:35-51

The light shines in the darkness, **and the darkness did not overcome it. Amen**

When our daughter was a very little girl, 3 or 4 years old, she had an intriguing way of welcoming guests to our home. Becky would pull out her baby book and sit down with them and show them page after page of pictures of herself. She wanted each person to get to know her, to learn the story of her life. Becky has always seen a stranger as a friend she just hadn't met yet.

God created human beings to be in healthy, happy, and supportive relationships with one another. When we seek out a life partner, we look for someone who loves and cares for us just as we are. Our closest friends are those who let us have our temper tantrums, who laugh with us, and care for us when we are down.

A friend simply allows us to be ourselves with all our idiosyncrasies and loves us for them.

Some of us are more cautious than my daughter once was about revealing too much about ourselves at first. These people are much better at asking questions of others and listening to their stories to learn more about them. And those who are best at those skills listen well because they truly want to know about the other person.

The same is true in our relationship with God. Some people go looking for God and some don't realize they've been longing for that relationship—until God comes to them.

In the beginning of John's gospel we read, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made God known." (John 1:18) Jesus came to the world so that humanity could know God, and so that we would come to see that God knows us, as Psalm 139 expressed so well this morning.

In the gospel reading, we see both directions of the formation of the new relationships between Jesus and the first disciples. Some have been seeking the Messiah. They started by following John the baptizer. He seemed pretty close to what they had been expecting from what Moses wrote in the law and what the prophets said. But John had told them that he was only a messenger, pointing the way to the promised one.

And that's exactly what he does when he points to Jesus saying, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The prophet Isaiah spoke of a servant savior who would take on the sin of the world, like a lamb whose life was sacrificed for an offering. By calling Jesus the Lamb of God, those first two disciples wanted to know more and asked where he was staying. Something in their hearts was drawing them to get to know Jesus better.

But not everyone meets Jesus like that, seeking Jesus out for themselves. Sometimes Jesus needs to come to us, like he did with Nathanael. He had just been sitting under a tree, minding his own business when Philip came to invite him to meet Jesus.

Have you ever been invited to meet Jesus? I have been asked more than once if I have “found” Jesus. But as one who grew up attending worship every Sunday, I thought I didn’t need to find him. Jesus has always been a part of my life, even as that relationship has had times of closeness and distance over time.

I will admit, though, that I am intrigued by the stories of those who have had more dramatic first encounters with Jesus than I had. Our individual experiences of recognizing Jesus or having Jesus enter our lives in more meaningful ways varies from person to person.

Several weeks ago, we pulled together a team of people in our congregation who are spending some time asking others about their encounters with God. They are asking things like: What is God doing in the world? How is God present in your life? When have you experienced a time when Jesus was made known to you?

This team of our Zion members is engaging in a process through the Montana Synod called Faithful Innovations. Eventually, we’ll be talking about how God might be calling our congregation to be engaged in God’s activity in the world. But first, we need to learn from you about how you either seek a relationship with God or how God has entered into your life and your heart.

Some of the conversations our folks have had with the Faithful Innovations team told how God was made known to them in times of loss or struggle. Some see God’s hand in the beauty of creation. Others did not have a clear relationship with God or with Jesus. They had questions, wondering where God is in the midst of the troubles in the world.

A couple of years ago, our congregation started an emphasis on faith formation, which can sound formal or complicated somehow. The formation of faith is really just getting to know Jesus more and more over time.

The first disciples somehow recognized Jesus instantly. But their faith in him would be challenged—and then deepen—over time. The same is true with us. Everyone meets Jesus in their own way and the growth of that faith takes care and attention.

The faith formation we have been teaching involves being in relationship with Jesus and with other believers. That’s why Jesus empowered those first disciples to start the church, so that we could care for one another and encourage our faith formation together.

We are meant to share our individual faith experiences with one another, to give witness to where we encounter God’s presence, grace, and guidance. Sometimes one person’s story will be the invitation another person needs to seek that deeper relationship with Jesus—like Andrew and Phillip did with Peter and Nathanael.

To grow in our faith, and to nurture faith in one another, we need to learn to talk about how and where and when Jesus is made known to us. We can do that in guided learning times of Bible studies, after school programs and Confirmation classes.

But we also need to learn to do that around our dinner tables, on the phone with our extended family, and when we are helping one another get through the struggles of a pandemic and the everyday balancing of work and family life.

We have tools to help with that, like the *Taking Faith Home* pages we post on our E-News each week. And we can ask very simple questions of one another. Where do think God is at work in that situation? How might God be calling you to serve? Where is God's power needed in the world?

And then listen, without telling your own story, without judging whether that person's experience is valid. Listen, and perhaps your listening will draw you into deeper relationship and serve as the presence of Jesus for that person.

Jesus could handle Nathanael's doubts and questions. He can handle ours, too. If you are still unsure about Jesus, maybe the first step is to see him as a friend you just haven't met yet. Let us be bold to invite our friends and neighbors to come and see Jesus, the one who knows us and draws us into a loving relationship with God.

Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Guided by Christ made known to the nations, let us offer our prayers for the church, the world, and all people in need.

A brief silence.

For the body of Christ gathered throughout the world, especially Bradn Buerkle and all missionaries, and for all servants of the gospel, that following Jesus, the church lives out its calling every day, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God.

For all peacekeepers, especially police officers and firefighters, for attorneys and paralegals, for military personnel, and for the leaders of governments, that they provide protection to all people, especially the most vulnerable. For Present-elect Joe Biden as he and the new cabinet and staff prepare to take office this week, that there would be a peaceful transition, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God.

For those lacking food or shelter, for those who are sick or grieving, especially those affected by the coronavirus, and for those who are imprisoned or homebound especially our loved ones listed in our bulletin, that God console all who suffer, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God.

For those who seek to know God, for those who wonder about and question God's presence and power, for all the people of God, that nourished by word and sacrament we would extend Jesus' invitation to come and see the love of God expressed in Christian community, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

In thanksgiving for the saints who have gone before us, especially our sister, Harriet Irish, that their lives give us a vision of the gospel in action, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God.

Merciful God, hear the prayers of your people, spoken or silent, for the sake of the one who dwells among us, your Son, Jesus Christ our Savior.

Amen.