

Epiphany Sermon Series: Encountering God in Worship; Sermon Title: Aha!

Matthew 2:1-11; Psalm 29; Mark 1:4-11

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Have you ever had an “Aha!” moment? A moment where you were surprised by something or had a revelation, realization, a discovery? Perhaps it was a something that was right in front of you and you saw it in a new way? Or something you already knew but now it is connecting with you now in a fresh way?

This past week I took a seminary class on the Book of Joshua entitled Divine Violence. This is a troubling book because there are verses that have God condoning a violent take-over of the Promised Land including a divine directive for genocide. Joshua isn’t often preached on or even studied because we don’t know what to do with the troubling texts. People have used these texts to condone violence and war, however. In the class we studied the Book of Joshua contextually. Then we compared it to the Book of Acts in the New Testament. The Book of Acts is not about a hostile takeover. Instead, the Holy Spirit comes upon the Apostles and the church is born. I thought, “These two books are completely different. How can they be compared?” And then the professor began the comparison and my eyes were opened. Basically what the two books have in common is that each is establishing a new community. But there is so much more. As I encountered these sacred texts in a new way, I had several “Aha!” moments as new connections were made.

The magi had an “Aha!” moment when they discovered the new star in the sky and researched what it meant. A new king was born! He must be someone pretty important to the cosmos, to God, to whomever or whatever they believed that a star was placed in the sky at his birth. They were so excited about the discovery that they set out for a long journey following nothing but this special star. Why? So they could worship the newborn king. What was this worship? In ancient times it was to bow down, literally to get on one’s knees and bow one’s head; or lie down on the ground, prostrate, out of respect or reverence. One worshipped another in a posture of submission or as an act of humility. Thus in our Christmas Nativity scenes we have the magi kneeling at the manger. For these magi worship wasn’t about music, prayers, or scripture reading. It was a physical act of reverence. The magi traveled hundreds of miles which took a year or two just to pay this kind of homage to a child that a star claimed was special.

We don’t have to travel hundreds of miles to worship the New Born King. We have this opportunity every day. Every day is a day to worship God in Christ. Worship can be kneeling beside our beds to say our prayers, or praising God when we see a spectacular act of nature, or thanking God for our blessings, or praying for someone or situation, or listening to our favorite Christian music. These and others can be moments in which we give honor and reverence to God. These are private moments of worship-important moments in which we give ourselves to God. How do you worship God daily? Our public worship on Sunday is similar but different from our private worship. In public worship we gather together as a group of believers to connect with God by offering praise in song and word, by offering our prayers together, by hearing the scriptures read out loud, by listening to a message that inspires and/or challenges. By being together in a group we gain strength, power, and encouragement. Many say they don’t need to worship corporately. They can worship God at home and we can, but it isn’t the same as worshipping with others. John Wesley viewed public worship of God important to our spiritual development. In his list of ordinances of God that we are to keep, public worship is the first one. Receiving communion, studying scriptures, praying, and fasting are other ordinances of God we can practice. Basically, whatever we do that keeps us connected to God and develops our relationship with God is an ordinance. As we practice ways to connect

with God, we will discover those moments of “Aha!” as God reveals Godself to us. This is what Epiphany means. God manifesting or revealing God’s self to us in Christ.

Today, in addition to celebrating the Epiphany-the manifestation of God to the non-Jewish magi, we are also celebrating the Baptism of the Lord. In the Eastern churches the two are always celebrated together. This year we are celebrating them together because it is a fluke of our calendar. So today in our public, corporate worship we read both the Epiphany and Baptism scriptures. In the intro to the reading from Mark, the Baptism of Jesus, you were asked where you saw elements of worship in the text? This may be the only time in the Bible where God is worshipping someone. If we define worship as giving reverence or honor to another, in this text, God reveres Jesus, honors Jesus, by sending the Spirit like a dove and saying these words of blessing, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” These are words of blessing, but also a claim. God says to Jesus, “You are my Son. You are mine. I claim you as my Son. I love you. I am so proud of you!” What do you think Jesus was feeling when he heard these words? Acceptance, loved, pride, joy, affirmation, and/or fear? We all need to hear words like these from a parent or our children need to hear them from us? Yes, this is a moment of worship-a moment of honor, of reverence, and of blessing. However, with these words and the action of sending of the Spirit, Jesus was blessed.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus submitted himself to be baptized? John the Baptist was a renegade doing this baptism thing out in the countryside in the Jordan River. This kind of baptism was not part of the Jewish tradition. The text states that he was offering a baptism of repentance. This has been interpreted as having one’s sins washed away. We know the meaning of repentance to be one of realizing one needs to change one’s behavior; and then intentionally changing it, like changing direction. Repentance is more than saying, “I’m sorry.” It is establishing a new beginning. John realizes that he is not worthy of baptizing Jesus, but Jesus comes to receive this baptism of repentance. Did Jesus need to repent? Jesus as the Son of God was sinless. But still he came. He humbled himself to receive. Some theologians believe Jesus was baptized to take away the sins of all humanity. But what if, Jesus would have said, “I don’t need to repent of anything. I’m God’s Son. I cannot sin.” What if Jesus would have allowed this arrogance to take over? One, he would have needed the baptism, then! Two, he would have missed this awesome blessing; “You are my Son. You are mine. I claim you as my Son. I love you. I am so proud of you!” He would have missed God’s “Aha!” moment!

What “Aha” moments from God do we miss? How does God want to bless us, but we don’t show up? Worship is all about showing up. Worship is about focusing on God. Worship is what we bring to God. When we walk into this room, are we ready to worship? Are we ready to give praise to God for God being God? Are we ready to give thanks to God? Are we ready to repent of our sin? Are we ready to give to God not just from our finances, but from our very being, our heart and our soul? What spirit do we have when we walk into worship? Are we ready to receive the blessing God has for us? Are our eyes, ears, and hearts open to experience the “Aha!” moments God has waiting for us?

Psalms 29 begins with, “Ascribe [Give] unto the Lord the glory due unto his name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.” And concludes with “The Lord will give strength unto his people; the Lord will bless his people with peace.” Worship is about giving to God. Why? Because God loves us and in our giving we receive so much more than we give: blessings, perhaps a new realization, or a new revelation. It all depends on what we bring to our worship. As we begin this New Year, ask yourself, “What kind of attitude or spirit do I bring when I come to worship? What do I bring to give in my worship to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Do I come ready to both give and receive?”

Resources: “The General Rules of the Church” from *The United Methodist Book of Discipline 2016*; “What is true worship?” by Delesslyn A. Kennebrew from www.christianitytoday.com

