

**The Reverend Marjo Anderson**

**A: Epiphany 3**

**Isaiah 9:1-4, Psalm 27:1, 4-9, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, Matthew 4:12-23**

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**“The Answer to Everything”**

It's so easy to read these stories in the Bible

as if they were just favorite, familiar, fictional bedtime stories.

We read about the beginning of Jesus's ministry

and we just assume it came right after his baptism, after he's received the Holy Spirit,

and after he's successfully come through his testing in the wilderness,

but we actually don't know how much time elapsed between his time in the wilderness

and his starting out in ministry.

What the writer of the gospel does tell us

is that it was the arrest of John the Baptist that was the spark that ignited his ministry.

When he hears that John has been arrested, Jesus responds

by leaving his hometown of Nazareth, moving to a more populated place –

Capernaum on the sea in Galilee –

a place whose history has prepared it for what Jesus is planning to do.

That history is mentioned in our first reading for today –

so let me give you a bit more context for that reading.

Assyria is threatening to take over Ephraim (the northern kingdom of Israel)

and Judah (the southern kingdom of Israel).

Fearful that his kingdom cannot survive on its own,

the king of Ephraim makes an alliance with the king of Syria.

They want Ahaz, king of Judah, to join them, but he refuses so they threaten to attack him.

In the midst of this political conflict, Isaiah tells king Ahaz of Judah

that he doesn't have to choose between allying himself with Assyria

or allying himself with the anti-Assyrian coalition of Ephraim and Syria.

Rather Isaiah says that Judah should put its hope in God, who will even give them a sign

The sign is that a child will be born who will be called Emmanuel, or “God with us”.

Now I want you to just take a minute and think about what it would be like to be king Ahaz.

You've got this huge empire of Assyria threatening invasion,

and you've got these other two anti-Assyrian kings who are threatening invasion.

You feel you have to choose between these 2

and you know that this choice is the most important one you will ever make.

You know that your life and your kingdom and the lives of everyone in your kingdom –

not to mention your success and reputation and wealth –

depends on you backing the best horse.

And if that was not enough of a decision, here comes the prophet Isaiah

telling you not to choose either alliance – but simply to trust God.

Really?!

Do nothing when not only the giant empire of Assyria is threatening,

but the 10 northern tribes and the kingdom of Syria are also threatening?!

Talk about being in a place of darkness and hopelessness and gloom!

And here you are being counseled to do nothing, but trust in God!

Let's face it – that counsel from Isaiah must have seemed utter foolishness.

In the end Ahaz doesn't listen to Isaiah and makes an alliance with Assyria

which destroys the northern kingdom of Israel as well as Syria.

While King Ahaz and Judah survive physically,  
they become completely subject to Assyria and Ahaz capitulates completely,  
going so far as to outlaw Judaism and replace it with the religion of Assyria.  
He sacrificed his own son to the Assyrian god.  
And would have sacrificed his other son, Hezekiah,  
but Hezekiah survives, eventually becomes king, and reverses all the evil his father has done.  
Ahaz trusted in his own common sense and made an alliance that he thought would ensure his survival,  
but because Ahaz did not listen to and trust in God,  
both the northern and southern kingdoms lost their freedom  
and lived forever after as oppressed people in an occupied land.

In Isaiah's time Zebulun and Naphtali had been destroyed by an invading imperial army  
and in Jesus' time they were still chafing under the oppressive rule of Rome.  
No wonder Jesus decided to launch his ministry from this place that so longed to be set free.

Now remember that in first century Judaism, no one expected the Messiah to be the son of God.  
The Messiah was not seen as a spiritual, religious savior, but as a political one.  
John the Baptist did not just talk about people's personal relationship with God;  
John confronted and spoke out against the evil that he saw in society, government and politics.  
That's why he's in jail!

It's hard sometimes for us to keep religion and politics together in our minds when we read these stories  
because we've grown up in an environment where church and state are separate.  
So it may help to view John the Baptist as a kind of Martin Luther King Jr –  
someone whose convictions arose out of his faith,  
but whose words & actions held politicians & government & society accountable,  
someone who was so threatening to the status quo that he was imprisoned & terrorized & eventually killed.  
Martin Luther King Jr. led what we call the civil rights movement,  
a movement designed to move society to a more moral, just, and righteous place,  
a movement that worked to set free the oppressed.  
And that was the same kind of movement John had been leading.  
But now John had been sidelined and Jesus knew it was his turn to take the field.  
And he begins by quoting John's exact message, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near!"

What that meant was the same thing it meant in Isaiah's time.  
It wasn't about making alliances with other kingdoms  
or about following the rules that allow oppression within one's own kingdom.  
What Isaiah, what John the Baptist, and what Jesus called people to do

And so when Jesus called the disciples,  
they weren't following him simply because he was a charismatic person.  
Why would they leave their livelihood and their family responsibilities  
and their economic security behind to follow this man?  
It was because they believed in the mission.  
And the mission as they saw it at that point was that things couldn't stay the same as they were.  
Something needed to change.  
And they were putting their hopes that Jesus was the one to overthrow Roman rule.  
What they learned over the next 3 years, of course,  
was that for Jesus it wasn't about overthrowing Roman rule by human power;  
it was allowing God to rule in their own lives.

As human beings it is really difficult for us to put our trust in God instead of in ourselves.  
There are those here who think that Salem needs to solve its own problems  
and maybe form alliances with others in order for us to survive.  
But I am here to say that I'm not going to put my trust in any other alliance;  
I'm going to put my trust in God.  
I don't know where God is leading us, but I trust that God IS leading us.  
I don't know exactly where God is leading us  
and I don't know how we are going to get there,  
but I know that God will get us to wherever it is that God wants us to be.  
You may blame me because I cannot give you a map & I cannot give you a strategic plan  
but I can't give you what I have not been given.  
At some point God will make clear what God's plan is for us  
but God will do that in God's own time and on God's time table, not on ours.

We all – every single one of us – would like to be the god of our own life.  
We would like things to be under our control.  
We would like to be in control of ourselves.  
We would like to be in control of those around us.  
But the fact of the matter is we aren't.

I have a confession to make. This week I failed.  
I was visiting with an old friend –  
a friend with whom I had had a falling out, but with whom I had reconciled.  
We were talking and everything was fine, and then they said something  
and all of the sudden I was back in the place where I've been hurt before  
and I was feeling that hurt all over again and I reacted and spoke out of that hurt.

Later, I was so embarrassed and humiliated and ashamed and guilty  
that I never wanted to see that person again;  
I couldn't face them and I couldn't face God.  
I just wanted to run away and hide, and even as I was feeling and thinking that,  
I pictured myself as Adam and Eve, hiding behind a bush  
because they were ashamed of their failure and consumed by their shame.  
I knew I should talk to God about it, but I couldn't face him.  
The next day as I was thinking about how I knew I should talk to God but couldn't bring myself to do so,  
I kept thinking about that passage in Matthew where it says  
if you're bringing your gift to the altar and you remember a conflict, go to that person.

So I screwed up my courage and called my friend.  
It was not a comfortable conversation, but at the end I felt better somehow.

So even though I had missed the prayer call on Wednesday and Thursday mornings,  
I was finally ready so I set my alarm for 6:30 Friday morning.  
And when I got on the prayer call this is what I heard....

*“I want to read to you from the book*

*Jesus Calling: Enjoying Peace in His Presence by Sarah Young.*

*‘Don’t be hard on yourself.*

*I can bring good even out of your mistakes.*

*Your finite mind tends to look backwards and you long to undo situations you have come to regret.*

*This is just a waste of time and energy, leading only to frustration.*

*Instead of focusing on the past, release your mistakes to me.*

*Look to me in trust, anticipating that my infinite creativity  
can weave both good choices and bad into a lovely design.*

*Because you’re human, you will continue to make mistakes.*

*Thinking that you should live an error-free life is symptomatic of pride.*

*Your failures can be a source of blessing,*

*humbling you and giving you understanding for other people in their weakness.*

*Best of all, your failure highlights your dependence on me.*

*I am able to bring beauty out of the morass of your mistakes.*

*Trust me and watch to see what I will do.’”*

Whether we are talking about the darkness the king Ahaz faced,

and the darkness that the king of Ephraim and the king of Syria faced,

or the darkness John or Jesus or the disciples faced,

or the darkness in our own lives,

the point of all of our readings for today is that our trust needs to be in God and in God alone.

*The Lord is my light and my salvation! Whom shall I fear?*

*The Lord is the stronghold of my life! Of whom shall I be afraid?*

The good news of the gospel is that the answers to all of our questions,

the solutions to all of our problems,

the light in all our darkness,

the hope in all our despair,

is in God and in God alone.

That applies to me, that applies to each & every one of you here & to each & every one of you online,

and that applies to us as a congregation of Salem.

It’s not about what I want as your pastor or about what your leaders want;

it’s not about what any one of us wants, or about our goals, or about our strategies.

Our trust cannot be in our own selves, but in God and God alone.

That’s what faith is all about.

It’s knowing that God is calling us forward to a new future –

a new future for my life, and a new future for your life,

and a new future for our life together.

There is an amazing promised land waiting for each and every one of us

and there’s an amazing promised land waiting for us as a congregation.

But we’re not given a map and we’re not given directions; we’re simply told to follow.

That’s what I want to do, and I hope it’s what you want to do, too –

to follow Jesus, step by step,

risking everything that we have and everything that we are,

because we love God and we trust God that no matter what happens –

no matter if we end up in prison,

no matter if we end up being terrorized,

no matter if we end up losing our lives –

God loves us and God is with us and that’s all that really matters.

Thanks be to God! Amen