

4 Epiphany Sermon
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Thousands of years ago in a small middle-eastern kingdom, the nation's king was deemed to be lacking in the eyes of God. So the Lord commanded a wise priest and prophet who had long ago answered the call to serve God to find a new and better king as a replacement. This wise prophet was instructed by God to travel to a distant town in order to find the man who had fathered the future king whom God had chosen. The prophet meets this man, and asks to see each of his sons. As the prophet met the eldest son, and sees his tall stature, he thought this young man must certainly be the one chosen by God to be king. Yet God rejected the eldest son, telling the prophet, "Humans look at outward appearances, but the Lord looks into the heart." One by one the man's sons came before the prophet, until ten sons had been considered, yet each one proved to not be the chosen king. The prophet was confused. The Lord had instructed him that one of this man's sons was to become king, yet none had been identified. So the prophet asks the father, "Are these all the sons you have?" It turns out the father did indeed have another son, whom he had not brought forward since it seemed unthinkable that the baby of the family might have been chosen to be king. The father answers, "There is still the youngest one. He's tending the sheep." The prophet commands the youngest child to be brought before him, and when the prophet sees this son God says, "He is the one." So the prophet anointed this youngest son, whom even his father did not expect would have been chosen by God to be king.

This youngest son, would grow up to be King David, the mighty warrior who defeated the dreaded Goliath, King over Israel, and beloved by God. As is often the case, David being chosen by God went against the expectations of the time. While it was assumed that the eldest or the tallest or the strongest of Jesse's sons would be chosen by God to be king, it was in fact the youngest, the one with the lowest status who had been relegated to sheep-herding duty while his brothers' worthiness was judged by the prophet Samuel, whom God had chosen to lead the people of Israel. And just as it was with King David, people's expectations would continue to be thwarted by God's will.

We see this in the reading from Micah, which is similar to the message we heard in Psalm 40 two weeks ago. The prophet Micah explains that it is not sacrifices and offerings that truly please the Lord, but actions that follow the Lord's commands. "what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" As we had discussed a few weeks ago, at this point in history the people of God were expected to travel to the temple, bringing an offering to sacrifice when they had sinned. This system was meant to inspire repentance in those offering up the sacrifice. The idea was that having to offer something up would inspire the person to understand the gravity of their wrongdoing, repent, and then sin no more. But that didn't necessarily happen. There were people who would dutifully travel to the temple and offer up their sacrifice for sin in order to be absolved, only to travel back home and continue to commit the very same sins over and over again. Because the expectation was that you would continue to be seen positively in the eyes of God even if you did continue to sin, just as long as you kept the appointed sacrifices. Yet Micah, like the psalmist, points out that sacrifices are merely a means to an end, a way to help people achieve what God truly wished for them to achieve—to do justice, to love kindness, to walk humbly with God.

So it should come as no surprise that God the Son, on his sermon on the mount and many other times throughout his ministry, would also completely turn peoples' expectations on their heads. While the world believes that the wealthy are blessed, the powerful are blessed, the influential, the intelligent, and the healthy are blessed, Christ tells us the truth—tells us who it is that is truly blessed in this world. Blessed are the poor, blessed are those who mourn, blessed

are the meek, those who hunger, those who are merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted. And blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on Christ's account. Though the world believes the rich and powerful are the ones who are blessed by God, Christ tells us it is those whom we deem as "unfortunate" who are blessed by God.

Paul echoes these sentiments in his letter to the Corinthians. That which the world proclaimed was foolishness, God has made the wisdom of the world, "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." While we may not often consider ourselves to be just or righteous, while we may not often consider ourselves to be blessed and we may not often consider ourselves to be wise, God does not see us as we see ourselves or by what the world expects us to achieve. In spite of our perceived shortcomings, God sees our gifts, our strengths, and God asks us to use those gifts and strengths in the service of Christ. As Paul implores the Corinthians, so I implore you "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters." Consider your own call. Make no mistake, each and every Christian is called by God to a certain ministry. This may be difficult for some of us to accept. Many of us are all too aware of our flaws and find it far too easy to come up with reasons why we are unsuitable to carry out God's work in the world. Maybe we don't feel like we're good enough, that we're not moral enough, that we're not knowledgeable enough. Maybe we don't think our faith is strong enough. Yet in spite of all of our flaws, God is calling each of us to live into a unique Christian life and ministry.

But how are we to discover this call? How are we to see God's truth in the midst of the faulty expectations of this world? The best way to better understand God's call for us is to seek a deeper relationship with Christ—to take on spiritual practices that help us to strengthen our faith and better know God. For those of us who don't already have regular spiritual practices, we should try new things. Things like reading scripture, praying, keeping a spiritual journal, reading spiritual books, making prayer shawls, or using prayer beads. If we take on new spiritual practices we can learn what draws us into a deeper relationship with God. And when taking on new spiritual practices, it is important to figure out a schedule that we can stick to to engage in these practices, especially during times we may feel least blessed. It is often during difficult times that we let our spiritual practices lapse, when those are the times our spirituality needs to be fed even more. For those of us who have a regular spiritual practice that feeds us, we should consider sharing that practice with others who are searching. The more we build up our spirituality and our relationship with God, the more we can understand how God's expectations are different, are more worthy than the expectations of the world, and we can begin to more fully know God's will for us in our lives. And as we begin to better follow that calling, we can more fully live into God's expectations laid out for us by Micah, to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God. So let us turn away from the expectations of the world, and turn towards the holy callings to which God is calling us. Amen.