

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Second Sunday after Epiphany – Year A

RCL Readings – Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

ACNA Readings – Exodus 12:21-28; Psalm 40:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

Introduction. In the Christian calendar, the season of Epiphany falls between the seasons of Christmas and Lent. It's a rare season in the calendar in that, depending on the date of Easter in any given year, the season of Epiphany can be between five and nine weeks. This year Easter occurs one week earlier than last year and so we will have seven weeks of Epiphany. Usually, the focus of Epiphany is on how God manifests himself to the whole world. Historically this was through his chosen people Israel and his Messiah and now also through us as we join in the divine mandate to be a light to the nations.

Common Theme. To be called by God is to be chosen by God for a purpose. Our readings look at the calling of God on our lives, as individuals, communities and even nations. The calling of God requires a response and, particularly in the Exodus reading, that response involves obedience. In the prophet Isaiah we will see that the Messiah is not only sent by God but also called and chosen by God for all the world.

Isaiah 49:1-7. In this passage, Isaiah prophesies concerning the calling of the servant of the Lord. The servant is spoken of as both an individual conceived in a mother's womb, and thus interpreted to be the coming Messiah and redeemer of Israel, but also spoken of as the nation of Israel as a whole (v. 3). In the opening verses, it is the servant who is speaking as an individual and proclaiming that his calling came to him from the womb. We are all commanded to listen to the Lord's servant, even the Gentile nations in far-off lands. Then God speaks to Israel as his servant who also has the role of bringing light and salvation to all nations. Once again we note that within the Hebrew Scriptures redemption and salvation are proclaimed to all the world, whether it is by the messianic servant figure or by Israel nation as a whole.

Psalm 40:1-11. The opening sentence of this psalm in Hebrew makes it difficult to know if the author of the psalm is David himself or if this psalm was composed by an unnamed singer for and on behalf of David. In either case, the psalm is a proclamation of deliverance that did not come immediately but required patience on David's part while awaiting God's salvation. God had heard David's cry for help. Yet patience was required as the Lord's timing is not always the same as David's nor ours. In Hebrew, there is a doubling of the wording for the verb 'to wait' to give the sense of patience and perseverance in the action of waiting. What is translated as "I waited patiently" is "I waited in waiting" in the Hebrew text of verse 1. For the psalmist, one of the rewards for being patient is that the ensuing deliverance is public, "many will see and trust in the Lord" (v. 3). Sometimes our struggles and sufferings can witness to the Lord which leads others to put their own trust in God. And if we knew that our adversity would bring someone to faith and eternal salvation, then that indeed would give us encouragement to endure patiently waiting for God's deliverance.

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1 Corinthians 1:1-9. The First Epistle to the Corinthians is attributed to Paul and another brother in the faith called Sosthenes. Who this mysterious Sosthenes is remains unclear. Some commentators refer to him as Paul's amanuensis. That is the literary assistant who writes as you dictate, copies your work or in some cases writes on your behalf. Although he is not referred to in any of Paul's other Epistles, the name Sosthenes does appear in Acts 18:17 where he is the ruler of a synagogue in Corinth who receives a beating at the hands of a disgruntled mob, probably in response to some anti-Paul sentiment.

Paul describes his calling as an apostle of the Messiah to be a divine mandate from God. He is not the only one. All in the believing community in Corinth are also called by God to be saints and a holy people. Paul calls the community at Corinth the church of God. The word church is *ekklesia* in Greek and it does not refer to a physical structure or building. The word describes an assembly of people and is used in the Greek Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible for the word *kehillah* (congregation). Both Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus are part of the *ekklesia* in Corinth. Corinth was a prosperous city, full of wealth and indulgence. This reputation of licentiousness is reflected in some of the issues addressed by Paul in this letter to the believing community. Paul gives thanks to God that, in having called them to faith in Jesus, God has also equipped his people with spiritual gifts, in speech and in knowledge that will help them endure into holy living. Paul was confident that God's strength and his generosity in the gifts bestowed on the Corinthians would assist them in their weaknesses to bring them guiltless (or blameless) before Jesus at the end of days. In our calling by the Lord, we are not left alone. Rather we are united with an ever-increasing number in the body of Messiah, the church of God. We are also empowered with spiritual gifts to witness and endure till the end, whenever that might be.

John 1:29-42. The Gospel of John, unlike the Synoptic Gospels, does not have a direct narrative of the baptism of Jesus but does allude to the event. John says that he "saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him" in verse 33. Many commentators say that the phrase "the next day" is also in reference to the baptism. Jesus has returned to John and his work at the Jordan. As Jesus approaches John calls out some family words: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

We read the text 2,000 years after Jesus and have many historical and interpretive traditions to help us in understanding the Bible. How does John know to call the Lamb of God at this particular time? How does he know the Lamb will take away sins, and what do John's hearers actually hear? One could simply say: Well, the Holy Spirit spoke through John. But that reasoning is a little shallow. The Hebraic expectation of the Lamb of God goes back all the way to the book of Genesis and the story of Abraham and Isaac.

For background, we call the Bible the "Holy Bible" usually because that's what is written on the front cover. In Jewish thought, the Bible is thought of as divine language. Every word in the Scriptures is there by divine choice; there are no superfluous words. As people in the ancient world did not actually read the Bible – they did not have their own personal copies like we do today – they heard it read (Paul

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said faith comes by hearing, Rom 10:17). Thus the sounds of the words were deemed to be very important, and also the words that were not there were also just as important.

What does it mean to say that the words that are not there are just as important? In Genesis 22, Abraham and Isaac are going up the mountain. Isaac turns to his father and asks where is the sacrifice. The word he used is *olah* which is the word for *burnt offering*. Abraham replies that God will provide a lamb. The word used is *seh* and simply means *lamb*. After binding Isaac on the altar and preparing to kill him, Abraham looks up and sees a ram. The word used is *ayeel* and literally means *ram*. What the hearers of the Bible heard was Isaac's question: "Where is the *olah*?" Abraham says, "God will provide a *seh*", and then God doesn't! He provides an *ayeel*. Abraham should have looked up and seen a *seh*. This is the word that the hearer was expecting to hear but was not there. However, Abraham said God will provide a lamb and so ever since Genesis 22 the Jewish people have been waiting for the Lamb of God.

John applies this messianic expectation to his cousin Jesus on whom he had seen the Spirit fall. The lamb that takes away the sins of the world is not the Passover lamb, as the Passover was not a sacrifice for sin. The scapegoat of Yom Kippur is the lamb or goat that is led out of the city to the desert to take away the sins of the people. John has combined the lamb that Abraham said God would provide with the Passover lamb and the Yom Kippur scapegoat into one messianic person whom John goes on to proclaim is "God's Chosen One" (v. 34). This probably explains why Andrew, who was one of John's disciples and most likely heard John declare that Jesus was the Lamb of God, goes to his brother and says, "We have found the Messiah" without actually having heard Jesus speak, teach or perform a miracle but simply through the declaration of the messianic title by his master John.

ACNA Readings

Exodus 12:21-28. Moses provides the instructions that, only if obeyed, would keep the angel of the Lord at bay. The blood of the Passover lamb placed on the doorframes would protect anyone inside the house from the touch of the last plague – not because you believed that it would, but because the blood was actually there. Jewish exegetical tradition says that some Israelites even invited their Egyptian taskmasters to stay as guests with them that night, knowing that this would also save them from the wrath of the Lord. Thus when the Egyptians awoke in the morning they realized what the Israelites had done for them and joined them in the Exodus. Exodus 12:38 says a mixed multitude of nations departed Egypt with Moses and Israel. Thus at the foot of Mount Sinai hearing the Ten Commandments are both Jews and Gentiles. This has always been the plan of God, to include all nations in his redemptive activity. God called his people out of Egypt They are indeed the chosen people, but they did not come alone. The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable, says Paul. Once called always called, and so the call for Israel to be light to the nations remains in effect.

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About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is a deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and a teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.