

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for the Communion Service, Epiphany of the Lord Sunday, January 6, 2008  
Lessons: Isaiah 6:1-8 and Matthew 2:1-12

## RESET

Whatever goals for the day or plans for his life Isaiah may have had moments before entering the Temple, he has them no more. His vision of the LORD God enthroned interrupts all other thoughts and concerns. Mentally, if not physically, the mouth drops open. The mind is cleared of all preoccupations. You know this type of event. Picture yourself at a swimming meet. Race follows race, heat after heat, and your attention wanders into conversation with your neighbor. Suddenly, the starting judge fires his pistol, signaling a false start. The noise-shock clears your mind instantly as though someone had pressed the reset button on an electronic device. For a split-second, you go wide-eyed. Then, a moment later, you comprehend what happened, realize there is no danger, and return to your conversation, but may well hear yourself asking, “Now, what were we talking about?”

The sudden jolt from the loud, sharp noise of the gun triggers the neurological event called surprise or, in this case because it is stronger, startle.<sup>1</sup> The gun shot startled you. It is easy to imagine how this startle affect built into us has saved many lives over the centuries. In an instant, the person who has been startled has a clear mind and all senses on alert. *What’s happening? Do I need to duck, hide, run, or defend myself?* What comes next will have nothing to do with whatever I may have been thinking about just moments earlier. The reset button has been pushed and all systems cleared for action.

One day this past week, we saw from the kitchen window a hawk standing in our backyard very close to the parking area, but unlike previous times when I have seen a hawk standing in the yard, it had no kill. Soon the hawk flew off, and all was very quiet. Eventually, there emerged from the top of a car tire, under the fender, a trembling squirrel that kept looking up toward the sky. No doubt, the event known as startle had saved that squirrel’s life. Food gathering had been forgotten instantly as the mind was cleared for evasive action.

Today is known on the Christian calendar as Epiphany which, in the Western churches, refers to the visit of the magi (or wise men) as the first appearance of Jesus Christ

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<sup>1</sup> See Donald L. Nathanson, *Shame and Pride*, pp. 88 ff.

to the world beyond local Judaism. The magi are outsiders, foreigners, strangers come to Israel's Messiah.<sup>2</sup> An epiphany is a manifestation, an appearance, especially of the divine but also of any important revelation that interrupts and resets life.

Isaiah is startled out whatever comfort or regret he may have had in his former life, where "former" means just earlier that same day. After the startle affect which is momentary, he expresses shame in the presence of the holy God. "Woe is me! I am lost . . ." But God does not want Isaiah lost. He is not being judged and condemned but called to service as a prophet. He has been found, not lost, and his life will never be the same again.

The vision is not given to provide inside information about God in heaven. Does God really sit on a throne? Do the mythological creatures called seraphim, really exist? Those are wrong questions. What matters is God's presence to this man for the sake of the people present and future. His life has been cleared and reset for service. From now on, he will resonate with the concerns and will of God and speak God's word to a stubborn people who will refuse to understand what they hear. He will shake their security and challenge their false hopes but also give them new and greater hopes, urging them to reset their lives in response to God. The epiphany<sup>3</sup> is to be shared, not merely as a vision of God enthroned in heaven, but as the startling call to a new kind of life.

We do not have to experience a vision of heaven to have an epiphany, a manifestation of God's presence and grace that resets our minds and redirects our lives. God's love and kindness can surprise us more quietly without startling us out of our wits, but the benefit can be the same either way. The mind is cleared of its old agendas, fears, doubts, ambitions, and cares. Then we stand ready for what comes next.

Shortly we will take into our hands the physical symbols of Jesus' self-sacrificing love and faithfulness. "This is my body, . . . my blood." Hardly a gunshot. A tiny cube of bread and very small glass of grape juice. And a new year on the calendar. We've done it all before. But are we immune to epiphanies? Are we really so fixed in our ways that God's grace cannot reset our minds? Is it too late for the future to hold anything new and vital for us? Hopefully, we don't require an experience like that of the squirrel in our back yard to shake us out of our habits of mind and routines of life.

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<sup>2</sup> It has been assumed they are Gentiles, though Matthew does not say so, and that conclusion is not completely necessary. See

<sup>3</sup> An epiphany of this kind is also known as a theophany, an appearance of God.

God meets us where we are in life, and that truth is our hope and salvation. I am not where I should be as a person, but God meets me where I am, which is a good thing. If God were willing to meet me only where I *should be*, we would never meet at all because I wouldn't be there. This truth of God's grace, however, does not mean that, having met me where I am, God settles down there with me and stays put.

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me."  
And he said, "Go, and say to this people . . . ."

None of us is Isaiah the prophet, for which we can probably be thankful. But God is no less real or present for us now than for Isaiah that day in the Temple, and we too are called to have our minds cleared and lives reset by the grace of God given to us in Jesus Christ, crucified for us. He lives and calls us to follow him for the sake of other people with whose needs and distresses he will confront us. A Visioning Team and the visioning process are nothing if not a reset button, helping us clear our minds and stand ready for what comes next so we can respond.

But how we resist. How routinely, even casually, we dismiss the vision and integrate Christ into the familiar, even if we are bored or disappointed with that familiar life we live.

*O God, surprise us, even startle us if necessary, before we just become part of the furniture of our own little worlds, windows shuttered to keep out hope and meaning. God, reset our minds. Here we are. Amen.*