

“Gideon and Peter”

Judges 6: 11-24; Luke 5: 1-11

Epiphany 5C, Boise, 2022

We are still in the season of Epiphany, and I’m thankful that I can make my appearance before you today. Your prayers helped bring me back. But of course when we use the word “epiphany” in a religious context, we are referring to the appearance of the Divine. We have that in both stories we read today, first the appearances of the LORD to Gideon, and, in the Gospel, the manifestation of the Lord Jesus to Peter in a way he had not seen before, informing him who his Master really was. We’ll concentrate our attention on those former and latter appearances our lectionary sets before us today, but let us also be aware that the emphasis in each story is really the response, the response of the human recipient to the Divine appearing. And that, too, is where we might find ourselves in these stories.

By convention, we usually call an appearance of God in an OT story a “theophany,” an appearance of *God*, and thus reserve the word “epiphany” for an appearance of Christ in the New — or, rather, something about Christ that wasn’t seen clearly before. These appearances we read about in either Testament can occur again in our own presence when the stories are spoken in the Liturgy of the Word. If we are attentive to the reading of that Word, spoken by the reader with God’s own Breath, his Spirit, the Word and Breath together will reveal God to us — here, today — and that revealing will call for a response. That is what makes Biblical narrative different from a mere chronicle of history.

So let us now begin with the lesser, with the appearances in the OT story, and then move to the greater appearance of God in Christ, which we read in the Gospel. Gideon, of the tribe of Manasseh, “was beating out wheat in the

winepress to hide it from the Midianites,” nomadic raiders who had harassed Israel now and then since they were in the wilderness with Moses. Gideon is threshing his father’s wheat out of view, lest a few of those raiders appear and take it from him for their own use. “And the angel of Yahweh appeared to [Gideon] and said to him, ‘The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor.’”

Well, we should probably pause here to ask, Was that a theophany, an appearance of God himself, or merely of his “angel”? Gideon then converses with this appearer as if he is someone other than God. “Please, my lord, if the LORD — that is, Yahweh — “is with us, why has all this happened to us?” Why are we not secure in the land God gave us? Why must we skulk around like this to be able to eat our own harvest? “Did the LORD bring us up from Egypt” to be given “into the hand of Midian?”

This, of course, is Gideon’s call. He has been chosen to be the one by whom God will deliver Israel from Midian. Gideon demurs, but the angel insists. The exchange goes on a while, because Gideon wants a sign, which involves Gideon’s first preparing a meal. And then the episode ends like most OT theophanies. The angel vanishes, and Gideon exclaims, “Alas, O Lord God! For now I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face.” But the LORD [or Yahweh] says to him, “Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die.” Why would Gideon need assurance that he would not die? He hadn’t been in the presence of God himself. The experience wasn’t like that of an ordinary person’s finding himself in the Holy of Holies, where only Aaron and his descendants were allowed to go. Or was it? In an OT theophany an “angel of the LORD” is always revealed at the end to be the LORD himself. Is God then his own messenger? It is a puzzle that any student of the OT must solve before he can make much sense of these events in the narrative that begins in Genesis and ends here in Judges. Gideon will be one of the last recipients of an OT theophany.

Although many Jewish writers have wrestled with this Biblical phenomenon of “the two Yahwehs” — the first who is Yahweh unequivocally, and the second who

is Yahweh's messenger, yet, mysteriously, revealed also to be Yahweh — the definitive solution is in fact found in the Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" [Jn 1: 1]. The Word by which God communicates himself to man — his messenger, so to speak — must be the divine Word because it is his Word, that which he speaks with his own Breath (or Spirit). Because it belongs to him and comes from him, the Word, along with the Spirit by which he speaks it, is as divine as he.

The principle abstractly stated is seen operating in the concrete situations of Biblical narrative, such as the two stories we have read today. Gideon is communicating with the LORD through the pre-incarnate Christ, the messenger who is also the LORD, because he is one with him. Gideon is not a fast learner. *Yahweh one*, acting through *Yahweh two*, his Mediator, shows mercy and great patience in waiting for the man he has summoned to come around. If we read on in Judges, past where we left off, we learn that Gideon doesn't just ask for one sign before acting on God's instructions. He asks for another, and then a third one that was the reverse of the second. God delivers them all to convince his hesitant servant. If such vocation is a model for us, we might find it comforting in that it sets the bar low. But once God has got Gideon over the bar, he does indeed make him that "mighty man of valor," and Gideon leads 300 others like himself in victory over the Midianites, driving them from the Promised Land. And although we don't read of it in Scripture, we know that Gideon's army continues. Today it is the biggest distributor of Bibles.

The epiphanies in the Gospels work differently from the theophanies of the OT in that the manifestation of the Divine is not just through the Word, but, rather, through the Word-made-flesh. The first Yahweh reveals himself through the second Yahweh, who has assumed human nature — and that makes the revelation all the more surprising when it comes. Christ turns water into wine, thus manifesting his control over nature as God's agent in the Creation, the one "by

whom all things were made.” Now here, early in St Luke, when Jesus is with Peter, James, and John by the Sea of Galilee, he makes a display to them of God’s unbounded generosity. They have fished all night, and caught nothing. Peter, out of deference to his master, takes out the boat one more time and lets down the net. When he and his partners struggle back with the haul, he is astonished. He is overwhelmed by the goodness of the Creator, by His prodigal overabundance manifested then and there in the humanity of his Son — truly an epiphany, even if St Luke doesn’t call it that in the text.

And what is Peter’s response? Much superior to the one Gideon gave, a better model for those of us under the New Covenant. Like Gideon, Peter shows hesitance, but not the hesitance of doubt. Peter needs no further sign. He has seen enough, and he thinks it is too much. “Lord, I am not worthy.” “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.” “I don’t deserve this.” “I’m just a fisherman who tries to feed his family.” “Please choose someone else to be your disciple.”

Then Christ, the divine Word now incarnate, speaks the same words he had spoken earlier to all those men of the OT who suddenly became aware they were in the presence of God. “Fear not,” said the Word. “Fear not, Gideon; you will not die.” “Fear not,” he says now to Simon Peter; for I will make you a fisher of men. The only doubt the disciple must overcome is the entirely appropriate doubt about himself. It is overcome by the grace of the one who made his divine Person manifest to them there on the Galilean shore.

The sons of Zebedee were likewise moved. “When they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.

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