

Main Idea: Even amidst the clouds of our competing allegiances, the glory of God can breakthrough and bring light to our darkness.

One of things I really appreciated about our conversations with Miroslav Volf, was something he said the first night we were at Yale. I don't remember exactly what he was responding to, but they were having him give his thoughts about various authors, theologians, philosophers and things like that. Then he said that if you have any intellectual curiosity at all, then theology is the best area of study because you get to study any discipline you like and then ask, "What is the relationship with God here."

Of course, theology is more than just an exercise in intellectual curiosity, but I agree that when you so choose, you can find that anything can give way to theological reflection. So what I find, is that am always asking myself how something relates to God. As I mentioned last week, even the great sport of bass fishing is full of opportunity to reflect theologically. This weekend, the Bass Master Classic is being held in Florida. This is the "Super Bowl" of the competitive fishing world and of course, I eat it up. I have watched hours of coverage on ESPN, checked the leader board online and even as I speak I am recording the last day of coverage. It is good stuff. To prove Miroslav's point, I found an interesting illustration that relates to our text this morning.

On the first day of the tournament, one of the most prolific anglers, Mike Iaconelli, had his first day's weight disqualified. He had four fish in his live well and went to check on them and discovered that two had died and two others were suffering. Mike had failed to turn on the aerator which circulates oxygen and fresh water into the live well and consequently his fish were suffocating. Now in bass fishing, you can weigh in a dead fish, but because the sport is very conservation minded, you are penalized. In a tournament where the difference between first and second place is \$455,000, ounces matter. Iaconelli was so frustrated that he broke out into a profanity laced tirade, and destroyed his running light. So under tournament rules regarding sportsmanship, his entire catch was nullified and effectively ended his tournament. He missed the cut yesterday.

When asked about the incident, he said he didn't know what happened. But all fishermen know. He just didn't turn on the aerator. Several of the fisherman in yesterday's

weigh in made comments about turning the aerator on as underhanded jabs at Iaconelli. But as I watched all this great drama, I was reminded about our human tendency to avoid responsibility. We just don't like to do it and my experience both personal and in observation is that we don't.

As I "theologically reflected" on bass fishing, I couldn't escape words of the apostle Paul in our scripture lesson this morning, because in many ways it is about accepting responsibility. You see, Paul was in this text, doing what he seemed to be doing a lot of time and that was to defend his ministry. Paul had the misfortune of ministering to a church that had a very charismatic leader and preacher, his name was Apollos. And there were some that were criticizing Paul's preaching and ministry because perhaps it wasn't stirring the hearts and emotions. Many scholars have said that Paul was probably not the most attractive fellow, others have argued that his may have had a speech impediment. While we don't know for sure, we can make a few conclusions from his writings.

You don't have to read much of Paul to know that he was not in the business of political correctness. Paul didn't seem to care much for beating around the bush. He can come off as abrasive. Theologically brilliant, passionate about Christ and the church, Yes. Diplomatic and tactful, No. And apparently, not as entertaining a preacher. So when we read the first verse, you can start to read between the lines and put together some of the controversy that Paul was dealing with.

"And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing" (v. 3). Can you hear the argument? Paul is saying, look even if our abilities are imperfect, our preaching boring, the gospel is not hidden because of us. It is hidden because those who have rejected it are perishing. And why, you may ask are they perishing? Because they have failed to take responsibility of all the competing allegiances in their life. It was a problem in the church at Corinth no more than it is a problem today.

Paul goes on to argue that he preaches the gospel and is not interested in promoting himself. How refreshing, but the problem is not with good preaching versus bad preaching but rather with the gospel itself. It can be too tough! It is too demanding and despite all our protestations, it is exclusive. Exclusive in the sense that the confession of the gospel is "Jesus is Lord," and you can only have one Lord. You see when you say Jesus is Lord, it changes

everything. It changes the way you spend your time. It changes your social orientation. It changes your political allegiances. It changes the “way the family is ordered” or the way you handle your budget. It changes everything.¹ It is inclusive in that it is for everyone, but once you accept the gospel, it is exclusive in its demands. And that is where the rub is for most of us. We don’t want to take responsibility for the fact that we have all these other allegiance in our life and so we blame the church, blame the people, blame the minister. We will blame anything but the fact that we ourselves have let the gods of this age cloud the glory of God in our life. The reality is that we are sinners and we can never quite let go.

Here is how it works for many of us. We have a spiritual experience. We could probably go around the room and many of us would have stories of times where we felt much like how Peter, James and John may have felt when they saw Jesus transfigured on that mountain. We see and feel God as close. Life is different, vivid, life is well, full of life. It is almost indescribable. I think about the night on Good Friday, we I grabbed my pastor’s hand and said I wanted to be a Christian. I remember the night at R.A. camp when I felt God calling me to some type of ministry. I remember a “Youth Quake” where after a concert, I prayed on my knees and asked Christ to be Lord of my life again. I remember the day, I knew I would start a new church and start a new adventure in life. We sometimes call them mountaintop experiences, and they are sublime. But they don’t seem to last. It is probably why in our gospel reading that Peter wanted to build a memorial. So he could remember the experience. We often spend much of our life trying to recapture those moments don’t we?

And then life happens. Circumstances change. We get bored with our congregations. We either feel that we are too heavily depended on or not appreciated enough. We find meetings tedious, worship uninspiring, even the Bible become a burden. We get caught up in our mobility at our job, or worried about what peers are buying. We begin to focus on getting a promotion, or getting our children in a better school. We start comparing our kids to someone else’s kids, or worrying about getting out of debt or when we can retire. We start looking at our life like they are chapters in a book and we just need to get to the next chapter, so we can progress, make some headway. We get pulled in so many directions that the glory of God that

¹ Bruggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, and Newsome, *Texts that Preach Year B*, p. 178.

we once felt in our lives so strongly, is dimmed by the clouds of competing allegiances. Some dropout of faith communities altogether.

I believe that this was in part what Paul is referring to in verse 4, "*The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.*" We get sidetracked by the gods of the age and the more gods we try to serve, the more the light of God is clouded out. And that is why Paul always comes back to Jesus. Because it is in Jesus, that we see God!

Paul knew this personally of course. You will remember his own testimony. Paul was an ambitious Jew with a mission, but it was an encounter on the road to Damascus, a blinding light, that rocked Paul's world. On that road, he became blind to the gods of this age by the light of the glory of God. This is why he says in our last verse, "*For the God who said, 'Light shine out of darkness' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ*" (v. 5). God brings light! Christ reveals God! In Christ, we rediscover that there is but one Lord and his name is Jesus.

So the question we have to ask ourselves this morning is how will we respond to this God that is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. While we don't have the formal invitations in our worship service that so many of us have been used to in our revivalist tradition, I don't want you to think that we don't believe in response. We do. In fact, it is our hope that each time you come to this table, you are making some type of response. We believe that when faced with the work of God in Christ, we must respond. Whether you are responding for the first time in the waters of baptism or responding each week as you take the bread and cup, we believe that we must respond to God. What will you do when God is revealed again to you?

When I think of that question I think of a story that Fred Craddock has told. He tells the story of a minister, a loving pastor, who gets a call in the middle of the night about a faithful parishioner who was in the hospital. The phone rings and as he sleepily answers, he is informed that this faithful member is not doing well and he better come to the hospital. The pastor gets up, dresses and begins the drive to the hospital in the stillness of the late night. As he approached the room, he thinks of what he can say. He enters the room and grabs the hand of his dear member. He bends down and asks the member if there is anything he can do for her. She looks at him bewildered and says, "well, I want you to pray for my healing." The pastor

awkwardly smiles and says of course, and he begins to pray. "Lord if it is your will, bring healing to this dear friend and your faithful servant." "Amen," he said and he let go of her hand. After a moment, the woman said, you know pastor, "I think it worked."

"What do you mean?" he inquired.

"I mean, your prayer, I think it worked. I think I am healed." And she leapt out of the bed and ran down the hallway and out of the hospital praising God.

The pastor, stunned made his way to the car, shaking. Fumbling for his keys, He looked to the heavens and said, "God, don't you ever do that to me again."

We have called this season of Epiphany, a season of discovery. We have followed the themes of discovery and light from the star of Bethlehem to the mount of transfiguration. But after all that effort, even with our imperfect preaching that Mike and I have brought, each of us must ask ourselves how we are responding to the discoveries revealed in scripture and worship. We have to ask ourselves about our own responsibility to allow the glory of God to shine through the clouds of our competing allegiances. Is Jesus Lord? Is God our God? Those are the questions of Epiphany. Jesus Christ has revealed to us the bright and beautiful picture of God. The clearest picture we will ever see. Now you get to decide. The responsibility is yours and yours alone. Will you embrace it or simply say to God, "Don't you ever do that to me again?"