My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Eternal God of our Epiphany bodies, minds, hearts and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight. Our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Our Gospel today reminds us of what can happen when good deeds start to be heard about far and wide. Remember last week’s sermon? Sure. But just in case, let’s review. Evil had recognized Jesus as God’s embodied purpose before any other person, and as Jesus starts to disconnect evil out of people to restore them to their wholeness and reconnection to the community, news about him spread. This week we see after healing Peter’s Mom and disconnecting more evil out of folks, EVERYONE is looking for him. Jesus is getting famous.

Most of us would kind of appreciate this recognition. If we did something that did good for others, it would be nice if others knew about it and gave us some credit for it, right? This is part of that thing we talked about a few weeks ago, where we agreed that humans, no matter what culture or nation they’re from, need encouragement, and lots of it. And part of that is getting some “atta girls!” or “hurrays!” when we do something that seems beyond our own capabilities.

We want others to notice. It feels good. It makes you wonder how the very human Jesus felt at that moment.

“Hurray for you, Jesus! Great job!”. You’re amazing.

Now, the thing we have to remember about the Bible in general and us here in modern-day America in particular is that, beginning in the ‘60s with the era of the flower children, for the first time in human history, we have been allowed to take our private lives and identities seriously. The American Psychological Association, in 1950, warned that parents who showed their children too much affection, what they termed as being “over-kissed”, would produce kids who were always anxious and unable to function, because the real world didn’t give affection and there would be a disconnect that could not be overcome upon reaching adulthood. An individual too self-absorbed could not contribute to society’s well-being.

So this shift was truly remarkable. Not just society, but parents, teachers, and others began to groom us into a realm of individuation where we were special, recognized as loved and wonderful. We didn’t have to have winners or losers, we could be valued for just having tried. But in building up our ego, there’s a fragility that we have, isn’t there? Our private life of emotions and feeling becomes the reference point for everything—those issues that make us feel special, inferior or superior, right or wrong, it all boils down to the “I”, without much of the “Thou”. The world is just or unjust depending on “my” point of view. But do we really know what’s really going on when we see the world like this? Many people take this very tiny view and form patterns and opinions, and then spend years feeding this ego-centric, or “me-first”, view of how things are and associate with friends who agree with them, start to only get information from sources sympathetic to their life and actions, and they take this day-to-day as normative and sufficient.

Many other folks say this is just post-modernism, since the collective experiences of war, hunger, poverty, disease, and such just can’t bind us anymore. But that would mean that all that’s left is a person’s ego crying even more for the attention it needs: what’s my power, status, and what stuff do I have that makes others not just see but envy me. The questions of life become, “Who is watching me? How do I feel? What do I believe? What makes me unique, or what is my brand?” Sports and celebrity persons will tell you this kind of life is over in a few years, and it’s not interesting in the long run of a decade or two. The “My Story” is not big enough, true enough, large enough, or meaningful enough to create patterns all by itself. It’s just a spiral of more extreme anecdotes seeking to connect to a point in the past, which can never be recovered. Yet some folks live their entire lives chasing that moment that can never be recovered, and they never move forward to broader purpose or connection.

Maybe we see how fragile this is—self-focused persons are often easily offended, fearful, and usually engage in some very odd posturing and pretentiousness. There are three big fears that we flee from and try to protect others from seeing in us. Fear of failure, fear of losing control, and fear of being unloved . (repeat twice more). You can see how folks who have trouble seeing anyone else’s point of view or who have to get their way all the time would want to hide these fears. If not noticed within us, it can lead us to a neurotic self-image or worse, put everything in our world according to ourselves so that the world makes sense again. From “my” point of view, of course.

But it’s where our society seems to be going—more of “my” preferences for individual music, selfies, shopping ads—and this small and fragile self creates dramas and victims so that it can have a larger stage upon which to be noticed.

And yet, our egos say for us to keep striving, keep going for more for “me”, because we are taught that more of “you” means less of “me”. And though our better angels are OK with giving stuff away, our wild beasts are most certainly not.

So though we know folks who will never get out of the “My Story” stage of life, we reach a point in our maturity—the second half of where we are, who we’ve become, where we start to understand the ego or “false self” have to fall away, because life is not only incomplete but we recognize we have to move beyond to something else. That longing is the longing for things beyond ourselves.

Just as our bodies need food, our spirits need ultimate meaning, and we need a framing story which includes and connects our past, but ultimately allows us to move forward into situating ourselves into more meaningful inner dialogues and outward life. That movement feels free, flowing, and we no longer fool ourselves that feeding our egos for our own satisfaction is enough.

So what did Jesus do? “Everyone is looking for you!” our text says. Jesus didn’t revel in name recognition. He quietly said, “let’s go somewhere else.” Somewhere folks would listen to the message, not be googly-eyed at his celebrity.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

We’re entering into a multipart sermon series which asks us to re-read our text, re-consider our actions, and re-define our lives as we have seen it to date. Our egos are so hungry for more language which soothes and strokes us in the “I’m OK, You’re OK” genre. Talk shows, self-help gurus, Dr. Phil, we love to look at others’ problems soooo much and say, “wow, glad **I’M** not like that.” It’s okay to view as weird entertainment, and we get some answers to some of our questions, so let’s understand why we’re attracted to it. But it can only take us so far, and never to transcendence into something other than “MY story”.

Isaiah talks of a people who have suffered, who don’t know who they are, who are so far down that they have no ego which can get in the way. There’s a reason why Jesus says that blessed are the meek, the broken-hearted, the poor in spirit, the prisoner. Because they no longer have the barriers of protection that make them me-centric. Isaiah’s people—read verse 31 of today’s text—understand hope.

Hope in the Lord. Renewal of strength. There is a story of “Us” and of “God”, and they have seen that “My Story” is not enough. They re-frame, in this song and poem of praise, their very existence to say that they remember a time from before they got self-absorbed, when God walked with them and was beyond time and space, unrestricted and not conditioned by them to act only in certain circumstances. God sees distress, disappointment, joy, accomplishments, but is also wise enough to move us to service outward rather than inward. And only God’s power—not our power—can move our fragile selves from “My Story” to “Our Story”.

What story are we living as a people? What story are you living in your life? Are we ready to move beyond our fears, to face our wild beasts, to give a chance for our better angels to minister to us, in this wilderness world in which we live?

Pray that God might open new paths this day and every day, that we might soar on eagles’ wings.

Thanks be to God,

Amen.

Thanks be to God, Amen.