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.

There was a time when folks were confused about the identity of Jesus. Imagine that. We read that down by the riverside Jesus got dipped and dunked by John the Baptist and the heavens opened and God said, “This is my son with whom I am well-pleased”, and the Holy Spirit descended.

But back then there were no hot microphones to pick up those unexpected words from above. Certainly no videos or cellphone cameras. God could have certainly chosen to plop the Word that became flesh into a generation like ours that has all the modern tools of forever capturing our moments, good or bad, to be shared immediately with thousands of followers. But God didn’t do that. He wasn’t always thought of as divine. The Gospel of Mark, which we’re studying, doesn’t have any comment on Jesus’ first 30 years. He was just the son of Mary and Joseph in a small town in the north called Nazareth. Our Jesus came to do a 3 year ministry tour with a few folks who didn’t know quite what to make of him.

And in today’s scripture they get an eye-full. There is the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah) that join Jesus, and we now understand that God’s child is separate and distinct from these other two. Moses and Elijah anticipated God’s new order in the world, sure. But Jesus said it, lived it, and did it.

Now, as I said at the top of the service, we’re in the middle of a three part series preparing for Lent. Last week we talked about ourselves as individuals, didn’t we? We said how that from the time we are babies we are trying to figure out who we are, and we spend an inordinate amount of time on that until we’re about 40 or so, at which time, if the world hasn’t wrecked us through greed or serial misfortune, we can even begin to contemplate something outside ourselves and our own wants and desires. We know there’s something more to life, we just don’t know how to get there, trapped in our own heads, self-help books, and Facebook folks who friend us, like this photo or that post, but offer little else.

We called this “My Story”, and it’s how we see things as sufficient and all that needs to be known—what is my power, my social status, my possessions, who is watching me, what do I believe? It’s pretty uninteresting because with this inward view always worried about me, it isn’t enough to create meaning. It’s just a lot of personal anecdotes that don’t have commonalities with anyone else. Living like this really brings home the lyrics of the Doors’ Jim Morrison who famously sang about alienation “People Are Strange”.

So along comes Jesus who lives outside his own ego and needs. He doesn’t ever talk in terms of his own context, does he? Others who seem most interesting to us almost never talk about themselves. They ask questions, and not just invite but provoke us into opening up about experiences and people we haven’t thought about in a long time. The Jesus we seek, follow, and hear about week after week does this to us, right? Let’s hope so. And the more we learn about Jesus, the more we learn about us, both individually and a group, as a community of faith, as a Church, right here, right now.

And we need this—we are social beings. We can’t possibly understand everything about everything. But when we try and figure out too much on our own, we get back into that confirmation bias we talked about, and we are at risk of getting too close to culture and identity wars so frequent in our society today. So most of us have a few different groups to help us out our reflections and struggles, right? These are work, school, neighborhood, church, clubs, and extended family. It’s how we, as social beings, live inside shared meanings and point of view. So we come to this place beyond ourselves necessary for belonging, attaching, trusting and loving, if they are healthy systems and traditions.

But we can get stuck here, too, can’t we? Ever been part of a group of folks who defend the boundaries outlined not as individuals but as “our group”. Group egocentricity can be just as, if not more, dangerous than personal egocentricity. What looks like greatness is often no more than very well disguised narcissism, and others are scapegoats for all manner of ills they trumpet. The problem is always others away from the group, and most leaders know the best way to rally folks to your cause is to generate a scapegoat. What are some examples (take all answers). Yup, want to scapegoat the church people? Folks who are good-hearted by doing a food pantry one day are godless communists the next for wanting to have government get involved helping defeat poverty by raising the minimum wage for all workers. By hiding in one group or another, we don’t have to look at ourselves very deeply.

We adopt their t-shirts, hats, flags, or symbols and put them out there to give us something shared to talk about. And we are asked to defend that group identity of “us versus them”. Being a Sox or Yankees fan, a Democrat or Republican, a Hummer or Harley owner, or having the American or Confederate flag on your car’s bumper carries with it some shared belonging that lifts some real burden from needing to do personal striving. And there is true comfort in feeling like we’re among our own.

The problems begin because most religion works as this system of belonging rather than a search for intimacy with God. We put all our eggs in being a Congregationalist rather than having curiosity about our own inner or shadow life of our beasts and angels and how we rock in the world. What is the goal of our Church and our faith community? Is it love of God, or love of our building, the clocktower, or the color of the wreaths, bows, flowers, and vestments?

Jesus wasn’t really interested in what the group thought. But God seems to know that we need symbols, songs, sacred times and places for communal support and encouragement. But we need these symbols less and less as we move from our own ego to a center that empties our needs and sees God more and more. We often see a freedom in our older folks who seem to know this. When my Debbie died, my boss told me to spend time “with the ladies who have the blue hair—not the white-haired ones, the older ones than that who have been through it”. Folks who have suffered, seen it, come out the other side, and been renewed.

Our scripture tells us that there was so much in their society that said for them to look away from God, they did just that. We’re an easily distracted, fearful people, and it feels good to listen to someone who takes up our problems and projects them onto someone else. Go ahead and read 2 Corinthians 4:3-6; what we suffer from today in America, they had back in 1st century Greece. Same stuff. Same problems. Human behavior hasn’t changed. But God hasn’t either.

You might think that I’m against groups. I’m not. We need a larger story in which to live our lives. We need to know that we’re not alone and we are desperate to know that what we believe is the Truth. The trouble starts when it becomes my version of the truth. Remember the movement of when folks used to talk about “alternative facts”? There ain’t no such thing. Facts don’t get changed to reflect our own prejudices and opinions. It’s the other way around. We were created in GOD’s image. Not the other way around. But we often change God to fit the way we live our lives.

The joy and burden of church is that we are required to do the hard work of suffering in our lives to better unearth understanding of God and how that works in greater service. Our scripture says we are light, and that our light shines out of the darkness. We are part of that transfiguration, that light that shone through the clouds, part of a witness to something greater than the law or the prophets, we are inheritors of all that God has intended for creation. Today. Right here. Right now. But God also said that we must grow beyond our old lives, the old understanding. When Peter wanted to build little temples for the law and the prophets, God said, “listen to JESUS.” And it was a renewed Jesus who came to teach further. Why can’t we understand this?

Let me leave you with these thoughts.

Our framing story is encountering each other. Facing ourselves in the context of the world’s truths and our God’s truths, and figuring out the difference by suffering the losses involved in following each of these. How do we get more people into church? There’s no formula or technique. But there is a good story to be told in that Jesus says we should get more involved in emphasizing people over possessions. How we live and what we say flows from our lives. And that also places the burden back on us as a community. What DID Jesus value? What did Jesus prioritize? What was Jesus notion of holiness toward others and self? What role did obedience play in following and loving God?

When our lives are viewed as ones who do what we say we will do, then we are not preaching ourselves, but God’s love. That’s a story worth belonging to, and a story that is soooo much more worthwhile than just our own little ego.

Thanks be to God,

Amen.