

5 EPIPHANY
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FIRST, MARSHALL
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PSALM 119:105-112; LUKE 7:1-17
The Heart of God

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that in hearing we may believe, and in believing, we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

The stories in today's Bible passage offer a breath of fresh air, a relaxing rest-stop, a passing, but pleasant episode of peace. It won't last for long: as we all know, the story of Jesus' life will continue – and ultimately end – just like it began: in a swirl of uncertainty, violence and pain.

From King Herod who sought to slay the Christ child with a sword, to Pontius Pilate who'll deliver Jesus to be crucified...it is, and will continue to be, a drama that will ultimately end with his death on the cross.

Jesus' ministry has literally just begun and, already it's been something of a rocky path. A few weeks ago, he started off by preaching in his home synagogue... and managed to make his *town-folk* so **angry** that they tried to **throw** him off a **cliff**! Then, last week Jesus **insisted** on breaking the Sabbath Law to **heal** a man, which made the *Pharisees* so mad that **they** started plotting how to take him out, take him down, take his life – to do something, ANYTHING to make him stop breaking God's holy law – even if he WAS doing it to help people!



Imagine that! – a community, a culture, a country **divided** by their ideas of **who** should be in power, **what** they should support, and **how** they should plan to **get things done** – hard to believe, no???

No, unfortunately...it isn't... From **Facebook** to the **Nightly News** to the **op-ed** pages of **newspapers**, it's painfully clear that we're living in a time when the **pressure's** on to choose sides, to draw lines, to make plans to **attack** those who are *the enemy*...those who, incidentally, **also** happen to be...our *neighbors*...

We seem to be on the brink of embracing a *dog-eat-dog, eye-for-an-eye, take-no-prisoners* mindset. It's a condition that has affected us all – across the board: culturally, politically, racially, spiritually.

That's why I'm so **thankful** for today's peaceful Gospel stories that lead **out** of that **miasma** of discord and despair, and **invite** us to rest in green pastures, **welcome** us to walk beside still waters, encourage us to let the Lord of love use this beautiful moment of worship to restore our faith, restore our humanity, restore our souls.

Today we watch Jesus encounter two radically different people who share this one thing: they are both hurting *and* both desperate for a word of good news...it's **everything** and the **ONLY** thing that unites them. In every other respect, these two are on opposite ends of life's spectrum.



The first person we meet is an officer in the Roman army, a Centurion (probably like a Captain in today's army). [I could NOT find a good picture of a fierce Roman soldier – but how can you go wrong with Legos??] Now usually, the Roman soldiers were despised by the Jews for *occupying their land*, for *collecting taxes*, and for being *brutal with their punishments*...and with good reason – most accusations were true.

But the leaders of the local synagogue go to bat for this guy, are even willing to incur the wrath of the Pharisees by asking Jesus for help. **Why would they do that? Is it just because he paid for their synagogue?**

In our faith-based organizing ministry in Anchorage, a cornerstone of our mission statement constantly reminded us: *it's all about the relationship.*

A politician, a pastor, a police officer – anybody can push hard and get some good things done, but the best things that are done are those that work through relationships, empowering people to find – and use – their God-given gifts in service to others.

Last Sunday evening, Carolyn and I went to see the movie Hidden Figures. **Anybody else see it??** I'd recommend you put it on your top ten list – it's incredible...and true! The story is about three African-American women in the early 1960's who are hired by a fledgling institution called NASA – the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. On the screen is a picture of one of them – Katherine Johnson.



The women are valued employees because they're brilliant mathematicians who are called...COMPUTERS...because they can *compute* facts and figures better than most people in the country – and better than any machine at the time.

They would be **regular** members of the team of folks who are desperately trying to catch up with the Russians' space program... **except** for this one fact: their **skin** is a *darker shade* than **white**.

These women's presence in that community of brilliant people is marked by clear lines of separation. There are:

- drinking fountains – clearly marked – for whites and for (as they were called back then) coloreds;
- lunchrooms – clearly marked – for whites and for coloreds.
- coffee pots – clearly marked – for whites and for coloreds.
- even BATHROOMS – clearly marked – for whites and for coloreds.

In one uncomfortable scene early in the movie, the three women are trying to get to work, yet are hampered by car troubles. Stuck on the side of the road, they're trying their best to get the vehicle started when suddenly they see the flashing lights of a deputy sheriff approaching.

Now, most of us would welcome those flashing lights, would be happy to see an officer of the law approach...someone to whom we could turn for help... But this was a different time, and a different place, and the women...were immediately on the defensive...and with good reason.

The deputy was less than sympathetic – and almost eager to be suspicious...until he demanded – and examined – their i.d. badges from NASA. Even then he was itching to be a **bully**, but those smart women had his number.

One of them expressed the worry that they were in a hurry to get to work to help America beat the *Russian commies* to the moon. The women only had to convince the deputy that *together* they feared a common enemy in order to be free of his bias, his bigotry...and it worked! So moved, he decided to give them a personal escort, so they could get to work and beat those nasty Russians!

This is one of the beautiful truths that the NASA community was finally able to learn: when we stop putting people in boxes, when we dare to be in relationship with them, we might just discover that God blesses all kinds of people with an amazing array of gifts...

So back to our Centurion...he's so popular with the Jews that he convinces their leaders to go to Jesus, and ask him to help heal a slave whom the man values highly. Jesus vs. the Pharisees, the Romans vs. the Jews – all of that gets tossed out the window when Jesus is asked to help – which he does, without even needing to visit the sick slave. Jesus marvels at the man's faith in God – faith unlike he's seen anywhere – even, or, maybe, especially among God's Chosen People!!



A short time later, Jesus meets the **second** person – a woman, who had **already** buried her **husband**, who **now** has to bury her only **son**.

It's a funeral procession of *sadness* and *despair*: **sadness** because of the man's death, and **despair** because the women's financial security has died with him. People bear the dead man on a stretcher as they make their way to the cemetery. Jesus sees the woman, and, we're told, has **compassion** on her. Then he says *Don't cry...* He touches the handle of the stretcher and says, *Young man, I say to you, rise!*

And what does the guy do? This formerly dead man suddenly sits up and starts talking!! I'd **love** to know what he **said**!! The people are amazed, maybe even a little afraid, but they've seen the miracle with their very own eyes, so they sing **hallelujah** and know that they are in the presence of God.

Jesus had **compassion**, we're told, compassion for this woman who was filled with grief, and pain, and fear. The Greek word for **compassion** means to feel something deep in your guts, in your bones, in your heart. **Jesus had compassion** – those three words – that's what I want you to hold onto as a take-away from these stories.

Jesus is God become human...not a superhero, not a superstar, not a rock star...but one who feels the world's pain with the very heart of God. Think of that: Jesus sees this woman in tears – and...it grabs him by the guts, it gets him in the bones, it stabs him in the heart...

To the world, she's a nobody...but to God, she's somebody...somebody in need of some good news. So Jesus puts himself right in her path, stops the procession, and tends to her broken heart.

This is the kind of God we have watching over us, right? We may not get everything we pray for, we may not see a good friend healed or have a loved one raised from the dead...but we will ALWAYS have this:

In Jesus Christ, you and I are invited to see God's heart, the deep compassion and love God has *for us*, and for each and every person on the planet – including our deepest loves...as well as our worst enemies. In Jesus, we're invited to see God's desire to come close and share life with us.

In fact, I think we can say that God is passionate about meeting us where we're the weakest – in the wounds and fears and pain of life. Jesus comes to us, stops us in our march of death, and then breathes life into our empty souls, or shatters the stone of our hardened hearts.

Theologian Robert Capon writes about the three times that Jesus comes in the presence of a dead person: this widow's son, Jairus' daughter, and, of course, Lazarus – all three of whom he brings back to life. About these amazing moments, Capon says:

*Jesus never meets a corpse...that doesn't sit up **right** on the spot... They rise **not** because Jesus does a **number** on them, not because he puts some magical resurrection machinery into gear, but **simply** because **he has that effect on the dead**. They rise because **he is the Resurrection** even **before he himself rises** – because, in other words, he is the **grand sacrament**, the **real presence**, of the **mystery of a kingdom in which everybody rises**." (Kingdom, Grace and Judgment, p. 405)*

This is the good news for today: we do not have a god who's cold and distant and uncaring. Instead, we have a God with a heart, one who will hear the prayers of the powerful...and weak alike. We have a God who renews our hope and gives us a future. We have a God who assures us of a coming time when death will be no more, when crying and suffering and pain will be no more, when all the wrongs of the world will be made right, when everything will be made new!



This is a good place to be – and a great word to hear today – that God has compassion for us, that God holds everyone deep in his heart...and will not let us go.

This is the light that truly shines in the darkness, a light that shines **upon** us – *and*, we pray, **through** us so that others may see it and be blessed.

The children's author, Madeleine L'Engle, once wrote:

*We draw people to Christ...
not by loudly discrediting what they believe,
or by telling them how wrong they are
and how right we are,
but by showing them a light that is so lovely
that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.*

-Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art

Stand firmly in the light of God's grace so that the cares of this world will not drag you down into feelings of despair, or anger or fear. Let go of those burdens that are part of a march of death, and let God's great goodness daily fill your heart with the light of life and love and grace. Amen.