

The Lord himself comes – Shazam!

The first Sunday after Epiphany

In this Epiphany season we focus on what is practical. How does God work here and now, concretely, practically, really.

All analogies fail. But when we're dealing with the Lord, he knows us better than we know ourselves. When we're dealing with this, we're dealing with forever. How does God work practically, now?

He works through his Word. It's not just John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" God comes in his Word and dies and rises again. It is as Paul writes in Romans 1:16: "The gospel is the power of God for salvation." It's important to realize what this Word is not.

First, the Word as it comes is not information. When Paul writes about this, he very specifically says, "Not information." Not "the wisdom of this age" (1 Cor 2:6) "Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made foolish the wisdom of this age?" (1 Cor 1:20). The "Word" is not information.

In the second place, the Word of God is not persuasive. It's not to convince us. Again Paul is very specific about this when he writes: "Not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power" (1 Cor 1:17). He says it's weak and foolish and scandalous. It's low and of no account. It's nothing to boast of. It's not persuasive.

In the third place, it's not a thing. There's a difficulty with talking about grace or gift as if grace were a gift we are given. Actually what happens is that the Lord comes himself.

The best analogy is from Captain Marvel comics (also the 2019 film, *Shazam!*). There was a character named Shazam, which means zapping. He came himself with power. The Lord comes with power, Shazam!, through his Word, as he himself comes to us now. He died and rose again, and in him we also die and rise. He continues; he is here and not elsewhere.

In Ephesians 1:4: "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world." In 2 Cor 5:21: "He made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." This continues here and now.

This message meets resistance. There are four objections. The first one is: If you took a survey, this is not what people think. They think salvation is about good works. But it's not. It's not about doing good.

The second objection is: What is the gospel, after all? Isn't it "love"? We come back to 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. What do these chapters say? They say it's scandalous, foolish, weak, of no account. There's nothing to boast about. That doesn't mean that whatever is scandalous, foolish, and weak is the gospel! Rather, it means that as soon as "the gospel" starts to become without scandal, without foolishness, and something to brag about, we've gone wrong. As is marvelously stated in Isaiah 30:10, we beg the false prophets to us "smooth things."

The third objection comes from those who say: "What then do we do to make it work?"

Some years ago at a large church in South Dakota, the janitor named Jake, a member of the congregation, had the habit of sitting in back with a clicker, counting how many people were in church that day. Then on Monday mornings the pastor would ask: "How many were in church yesterday?" The janitor would answer 487, 503, or whatever. He'd give a precise count. Then the pastor would ask: "Jake, what was the sermon about?" Jake responded with a puzzled look. He had had a very limited education back in Poland and hadn't really understood the sermons at all. Did that make a difference? The answer is "No." The Lord comes directly – Shazam!

The fourth objection: "Isn't it enough to know about this message from afar?"

We are like slaves up for auction, and there's one buyer there who will set us free. We want to be there with that one buyer, our Lord, who sets us free. We want to be there to receive his forgiveness, comfort, and freedom.

As Paul writes in 1 Cor 2:2: "I decided to preach nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." When we come forward for the Lord's Supper, what does this mean in terms of the Word?

Augustine talked about the visible and the audible Word. In the Lord's Supper we have the visible Word. Do you understand it? I hope not. I don't understand it. I've been at this full time for many years. If you understand it, it makes me nervous because it means you don't realize what's at stake here.

Is the message persuasive to you as a modern person? Does it suit you? Convince you? I hope not. There are intricate problems about all this that you haven't even imagined.

In the third place, do you feel it? I hope not. We have all kinds of feelings, but as Paul writes: It is "not with eloquent wisdom" (1 Cor 1:17). As soon as we depend on our feelings, we're not depending on the Word which claims us no matter how we feel.

You may think to ask me: Don't you as a pastor have special power to commune yourself? Sadly, there are some Lutheran pastors who mistakenly practice self-communion. But that is to lose the confession of our sin and his holiness.

Each of us, pastors included, receives outside of us, in spite of us. When I with you receive, the Lord himself comes and is truly with us. We die and rise with him. It doesn't depend on us, and it is forever. Amen