

Epiphany 2 (B)  
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Text: John 1:43-51

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Growing up in Southern California, I learned very early about earthquakes and fault lines. I can remember in first grade having earthquake drills. Everyone would crouch down underneath their desks, using hands and arms to cover their heads and necks. I remember one teacher explaining how important it was to stay covered up because of the big glass windows that filled one wall of the classroom. They ran from countertop level all the way up to the ceiling. I can recall looking at those windows and thinking that if they shattered during an earthquake, and big shards of broken glass came raining down, that would be really, really bad. I was very glad my desk wasn't in the row right next to the windows.

We're having a different sort of experience with fault lines in our nation right now. At times it seems like there is a fault line running right through the middle of our society, with the political left and right no longer even living in the same world. Instead, each side gets its information from different news sources, so that they aren't even able to agree on basic facts. Sometimes I feel afraid that we are so fractured that everything really could fall to pieces. And not only would that be really, really bad, there wouldn't be any place unaffected by the fallout.

In our gospel story for today, there's a wonderful, beautiful, hopeful image that helps us see how God is at work in our world and in our lives to heal our broken human family. And in order to hear how the Spirit is speaking through the scriptures to us today, it's helpful to hear how these words spoke to the fractures and fault lines of Jesus' world. Those fault lines were hidden just below the surface—between Galilee in the north and Jerusalem in the south, between the common people who flocked to hear Jesus and the temple authorities who plotted to kill him, between the Jewish nation and their Roman oppressors. The divisions were bitter, and all of these fracture lines would erupt in violence at almost any time.

Against that kind of backdrop, not all that different from our own, our gospel writer, John, invites us to recognize Jesus as the one sent by God to bring healing to this world, to bring us together. John reshapes an image that comes from an old story from the book of Genesis, a story about Jacob and his strange, strange dream about a ladder, stretching from earth all the way up to heaven. At that point in Jacob's life, when he had that dream, he had every reason to feel completely alone in the world. He had alienated everyone in his life. He had burned all his bridges. His brother wanted to kill him, and his mother had told him to leave home, to go live with his uncle Laban. Jacob was traveling, alone, and stopped for the night. With a rock for his pillow, he went to sleep, and dreamed that there was ladder, reaching up to heaven, and angels were coming down and going up. Jacob woke up amazed that, even though he hadn't known it, God was in this place. God was with him.

In his conversation with Nathanael, Jesus applies that image to himself. Jesus himself is like that ladder connecting heaven and earth, with angels ascending and descending. Being that ladder is another way that John tells us what it means for Jesus to be the Word made flesh, God's own

self-expression of love in a human life. Like that ladder in Jacob's dream, with Jesus, it's as if angelic messengers were coming down from God so that we can know God, so we can know that God is love. In all of Jesus' acts of compassion and love, it's just like angelic messengers are speaking God's compassion and love to us. In all of Jesus' acts of healing and forgiveness, it's just like angelic messengers are speaking God's healing and forgiveness to us, to draw us into life with God, the life God intended for us from the beginning. Jesus bridges the gap to connect us to God.

And here's the good news I'm hearing today. As Jesus connects us to God, Jesus also connects us to one another. As Jesus has overcome the estrangement and alienation that separated us from God, Jesus also opens the door for us to live in peace with each other, to overcome the divisions of politics and race and class. This good news is really simple, and really complicated at the same time. The simple part is this: Jesus shows us that God is love, and love is the only thing that makes this crazy experience of being human mean anything at all—love for God and love for neighbors. As we live with God, love becomes the governing reality in our lives—not success, not possessions or wealth, not power, not being right, not our dreams or desires, but only love. And in practice, love looks like Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness, Jesus' way of generosity and humility and healing. Love looks like inclusive, welcoming community and an unwavering commitment to justice and truth—just like Jesus. That's the simple part. It may be really hard to consistently put into practice, but it's at the heart of everything—love, not self-concern, defines who we are and how we live.

The complicated part is this: Even though Jesus is the ladder between heaven and earth, who bridges the gap between us and God and makes the whole human family children of God, he doesn't force anyone, even his own people, to cross over. And the same is true of following Jesus' way. Loving one's neighbor doesn't force anyone to do anything. Even though love is the only power capable of changing the world, it can't coerce anyone to show love in return, or to choose peace and cooperation instead of violence and division. There are no guarantees that love will "work." Love can open a door, but can't require anyone to walk through. Love is the bridge, but it can't force anyone to travel over it. And now, when some of the most dangerous divisions in our society are being fueled by people who identify themselves as Christians, Jesus doesn't force anyone, even his own people, to follow and embrace his way of love. I'm hoping that we may have reached a turning point. I'm beginning to hear some evangelical Christians speak about the need to really pay attention to the truth and not be led astray by lies and conspiracy theories, to listen to Jesus and engage with the world in a way that looks like Jesus. I'm even hearing some evangelical leaders speak about a need for repentance, because the church has given away too much in pursuit of political power. I'm really glad to hear that. But whether this is the year when things begin to change, or not, we are still people who have been touched by God's powerful love and forgiveness, and we know that there isn't anything else worth giving our hearts to.

So maybe the good news for today is that Jesus gives us clarity. Jesus is the One who embodies our Creator's love for this world, and Jesus shows us that God will not give up on us, will never turn away from us. That's what Jesus means when he says, "You all will see heaven opened and

the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.” Jesus is the One through whom God comes to us with grace and mercy and forgiveness. Jesus is the One through whom God speaks to us, saying, “You are my beloved child. You are forgiven, you are precious in my sight.” Jesus is the One who opens our eyes to see that every person is God’s beloved child, and that we are all connected. Jesus is the One who shows us that love is the only thing that matters. Love is our north star that guides us through life. Love is the way of living that we return to every day (even when fault lines are rumbling and shaking). Love is the gift that makes our lives rich with blessing and joy. And love is the end of our journey, and we rest our hearts in that hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.