

Sermon for 8 February 2026 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Scriptures: Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalter: Page 833 (Psalm 112:1-10); 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; Matthew 5:13-20

Sermon: Did you ever get to the point with parents when you knew they'd reached their tolerance level?

I feel that's what's happening with our Bible lessons for this morning. We're rounding the corner of the season of Epiphany, and all the messages are past celebration, or joy, or anything but "That's enough!" and "The party's over now.!" Read a few lines with me (let people choose).

Paul, too, is down to bedrock, not giving warnings or summing up good news, but just laying it out: "This is real, now; no more glossing things over, but strictly leveling with everybody about the revolution and what it means in behavior and fact."

When we get to Jesus, he's now fully mature, solid with both benefits and consequences for everybody. We've got one more week, and then it's a whole new ball game. There will still be some positive things to mention, but this is consequences now.

We've all got our stories of discipline, our reflections on darkness, our handlings of failure and disappointment.

I'm not one for wallowing in sin. Church has done the blame game 'way too much over the centuries; and right now, with all our dividedness in public life, shaming is definitely not the ticket, in church or politics, family or business, personal relationships, or anything else.

It is kind of beautiful how the Holy Spirit brings up suggestions right now...from ICE to the Upper Room, we're 'way too prone to blame sin for everything. In fact, I think the Holy Spirit is incredibly useful in times like these, showing up just when we've run out of judgments and explanations, both for Christians and Jews, as well as in all the other religions and the great fondness of our time for no religion and all.

So what works? Is it possible to give parents and teachers a piece of the pie? Did some of their judgment pay off for you and me? Even tougher to face, did some of our own teaching do some good? Can Minneapolis reflect some health in our body politic? The spirit of righteousness is surely as real as penicillin. Whether you're a minister or a mechanic, there are moments of truth and growth in every part of humankind, and Mother Nature is to be sought out and celebrated even this week and in this congregational fellowship to be recognized and honored, even celebrated. Creepy Holy Spirit, indeed.

I think that sums it up. Trinitarians that we are, it's time to exercise some awe not just as for the Father, or even the Son, but the wonder, the positive energy, of the Holy Spirit, totally outside

anything we can produce ourselves, that pushes towards goodness and wisdom and even lightheartedness in our souls.

It's not easy. Blame is still the game in much of our reality. But I urge us all, as a church and as individual members of the Body of Christ, and as a small but real element of the United Methodist Church, and Baltimore and Maryland ...there is a leveling energy at work in our time. That's what I see the Bible lessons today asking us to think about, after giving us a firm talking-to first.

Let us pray. God, we feel your nudging in these closing days of Epiphany. Help us obey your shove and even glimpse your smiles in all that's around us. Thanks for giving us scripture to sense and, more than that, to follow the good news of righteousness at work in our souls and bodies. Pull us out of discouragement and regret. We want to let you in, not only into our memories, but into too much modesty and regret. We really are your instruments, Lord. We are still growing up into the fullness of your influence, even sometimes your power. We grow up, Lord. Give us chances to handle situations right every now and then. Forgiveness is universal, once we learn to look for it and to allow it and to share it. You're not after killing us off. You aim to transform us and everything else...eventually. Isn't that your plan?

Take us over, more and more .. and show up in your mysterious ways in our lives as we accept your love, In us here and always, forever and right now. Amen.