

# St James United Church

Message for January 16, 2022  
Second Sunday after Epiphany



“Embodied Grace”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Luke 4:14-21; 1 Cor. 12:12-31; Excerpt from Howard Thurman’s *Disciplines of the Spirit*

Today we’re another week out from the end of the Christmas Season, exploring the first days of Jesus’ ministry. As we do this, I hear a hint of Christmas as Jesus visits the village where he grew up. I’m OK with an echo of Christmas. There was a time it still would be Christmas now, people leaving decorations up until Candlemas Eve on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February. I wonder if there was wisdom in that, perhaps too some wisdom in our tendency to treat Advent like Christmas, like a subconscious reaction to the trimming down of Christmas celebrations through revisions to liturgical calendars. We know in our hearts that twelve days just doesn’t give us enough time to ponder all that the teaching on Incarnation offers to us.

It’s a teaching that can be transformative if we let it be so, uplifting creation, us included, as both blessed and a blessing. But as I’ve shared, we’ve often been uncomfortable seeing ourselves this way, believing in Incarnation but limited to only Jesus embodying the divine. We also have the tradition of sacraments, ordinary signs of invisible grace, but rather than expand them to see ever more connecting points to God’s presence, as Protestants we constricted them to just two. I blame all of this on how disconnected we are from our Jewish roots, taking theological cues from Greco-Roman myths. There we saw divine aloofness for the world and scorn for the flesh, apart from occasional lusty dalliances. The idea that a deity would choose to be born was anathema let alone to do so out of love for creation. Our instinct is to keep heaven and earth separate, but what do the scriptures actually say to us?

Consider Paul’s analogy of the human body to Christ. We’ve heard it so often we aren’t shocked but should be. After all Paul doesn’t say, “The church is like the human body, a unit with many parts and all the parts of the body are one.” It makes sense written that way but instead Paul links the church to Christ, not just as a simile but something reflective of who we are. We read ‘Christ’ (Anointed One) as a title, but Paul drew on his Jewish heritage to link the designation to *Memra* (in Hebrew) or *Logos* (in Greek), the divine Word through which everything was made. He asserts that the Word / Christ is “the firstborn of all creation”, the life and grace of God permeating creation, all matter, human too, anointed with Spirit. This is what Howard Thurman felt as a boy looking up at Halley’s comet, knowing both he and it were connected, held together by the same spiritual reality. John affirmed that “The Word became flesh and dwelled among us” but Paul wrote how this same reality is embodied in the church as we drink of one Spirit. The Jesus who visited his home village embodied the Christ. We’re baptized into this and called to embody the same grace.

I know this sounds esoteric; yet it has the potential to shape how we live. It impacted Jesus, who after his baptism went into the desert to wrestle with what it meant for him to be God's child. If we're not sure what he discovered, we need only look again at what he read from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." This is a powerful mission he saw for himself, and by corollary for us. For Jesus, God's Reign is a world where the truth of how not just him but all creation is anointed with Spirit is lived out. So there are no outsiders, no reason someone is treated as lesser than, the imprisonment of scorn for our flesh so often expressed in scorn of others finally ended and so no more barriers to everyone's needs being met. Jesus knew that our failure to see the blessing of God in and around us twisted relationships, fixed in place long-standing injustice. After all, "the year of the Lord's favour", the every-fifty-year Jubilee when debts were forgiven, wealth redistributed, land returned to whom it rightly belonged, had never been implemented, instead seen as an ideal future. For Jesus, Jubilee wasn't just aspirational. Grounded in his experience of being God's beloved, he made his ministry an affirmation of others, a movement to extend the circle of grace belonging to everyone so that all of our relationships can be healed, including our relationship with other creatures and the natural world.

Now this ministry didn't end with Jesus. The same Spirit that anointed him and us extends it further as we put his teaching into practice. In this the church is to be an alternative community to what we experience in the world, where, as I shared last week, we experiment with what God's Reign looks like day to day. One way to do this is to apply Paul's analogy of the body. Note how he did not refer to Christ as the head. Paul, like Jesus, knew there can't be favourites, not if all creation embodies grace. So we listen to each other, hearing with equal openness someone who's new and from a founding family. We check unconscious biases based on race, economic situation, any so-called difference, doing all we can so that everyone who walks through the door feels welcome. We remove barriers so that any and all feel respected. Say someone vocalizes during worship or needs ASL interpreting. If everyone is blessed and a blessing, these aren't issues, a truth we commit to as an Affirming Ministry. And it doesn't stop there. We're called to reach out because we're connected and not just feeling charitable, applying what we've learned in the wider community as we listen to our neighbours, seeing where Spirit is at work, and alongside them, responding to what we hear. Who knows what we'll discover? We could be advocating for the resolution of land claims, partnering with environmental groups, or using vacant land for a mini house village. Who knows what we'll be doing but I'm grateful for our Social Action Committee which is eager to find out?

I used to be a liturgical purist, making sure Christmas ended when it was supposed to, but I wonder if in these Sundays after Epiphany we should extend Christmas, keep reflecting on the meaning of Incarnation. After all it's more than just an esoteric idea. We are all anointed with Spirit – as individuals, a faith community, neighbours, all of creation. May we live this out, embodied grace in all we do, joined to Christ as we honour all things in God's love. Amen.