

Old Testament Lesson—Isaiah 44:1-8

But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you in the womb and will help you: Do not fear, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen. For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my spirit upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring. They shall spring up like a green tamarisk, like willows by flowing streams. This one will say, "I am the Lord's," another will be called by the name of Jacob, yet another will write on the hand, "The Lord's," and adopt the name of Israel. Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let them proclaim it, let them declare and set it forth before me. Who has announced from of old the things to come? Let them tell us what is yet to be. Do not fear, or be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses! Is there any god besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one.

New Testament Lessons—Matthew 28:16-20 & Revelation 1:4-8

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

I can't speak for any of you, but I can tell you that I (personally) have been very grateful that we've decided to focus on our stained-glass windows this summer.

For the past seven years, all I can really say is...well, I knew we *had* them. I knew they were there. I could tell they were beautiful, I guess. And I suppose I was aware of how you could catch the sunlight shining through them at just the right time of day—casting an array of colors around the sanctuary.

But honestly, that's about it. I confess: Before this summer, I noticed these windows once in a while (perhaps), but I never really *saw* them—never really *looked* at them closely—never really *listened* to the lessons they were teaching.

Of course, for most of Christian history, the purpose of church art and architecture was an educational one—teaching the stories of the Bible to a (mostly) illiterate population. If you hadn't learned to read or write, then you depended on art or the spoken word from church leaders to understand the scriptures.

Open up a children's story book and you'll find big, inviting pictures with a few words sprinkled in.

In centuries past, the job of these windows would've been not only to inspire us, but to teach us about God, about Jesus, and about the Holy Spirit. Now, I'd like to think I've been inspired by these windows over the past few years, but I've certainly not allowed them to *speak* to me directly. I haven't opened myself up to the lessons coming through with the light.

Before this summer, for example, I would've never realized that that was a crutch in the second window. Right? I would've completely missed the water droplets flowing down from the chalice there in the fifth window.

Lord knows what all we miss or overlook because we're just not open to the possibilities. One of the scholars I've been reading recently, Judith Butler, writes this: "Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread." Possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread.

Siblings in Christ, our God speaks to us in countless ways. God is revealed through sermon and story and song and sculpture and yes—through stained-glass. But we've got to be *open* to those possibilities. We can open our hearts and minds as a daily spiritual practice—making us more receptive to who God is and how the Spirit is moving.

In other words, if we're willing to seek God in unexpected or unfamiliar places, God will be revealed to us in those spaces. What's more, if we actually *expect* God to show up and speak through sacrament or scenic vistas or service-learning opportunities, then you know what? God's gonna show up! God's gonna speak. God's gonna teach. God will be God.

It's kind of like when you see something extraordinary for the first time—say, one of those new Ford Broncos. Remember when those were reintroduced? But after you notice that first one on the road, all of a sudden you start seeing them everywhere, right?

It seems to me that God communicates with us in similar ways: Once we catch a glimpse of God at work, we start noticing God's fingerprints over everything. Once we *know* God is active in the world, we start seeing evidence of that truth everywhere—often without much effort at all.

For the past six weeks, we've intentionally opened ourselves up to the possibilities of a sermon series like this one—to what God can do and dare and teach us through the works of art to my right.

This morning I'd like to draw your attention to the seventh window from the left, second one from the right. You'll notice its three main images beginning with the hand of God at the top, an open Bible in the center, and a globe at the bottom.

See how the globe there is merged with a banner that reads, "The world is my parish." Those words are actually a paraphrase of one of John Wesley's journal entries; and they're meant to bring to mind the words of the risen Christ we read earlier: our call to *make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*.

Before I move on, let me unpack those words just a bit. This command from the lips of our Lord is about so much more than proselytizing. In fact, I'd argue we do a disservice to Matthew's gospel if we try to make these words all about conversion and spreading Christianity.

The so-called “Great Commission” is and must be about much more than that. It is and must also be about building up the peaceable kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. And building the peaceable kingdom doesn’t mean creating an earth of only Christians.

It does, however, mean ending oppression in all its forms. It does mean striving for a world where everyone, especially the most vulnerable, is free from fear and exploitation from those in power. And it means a commitment to modeling empathy during a time in American history that feels so callous, self-absorbed, and opportunistic. Ok, getting back on track...

Out of all these windows we’re so blessed to take in every week, I think this one feels the most vertically connected, don’t you think? In other words, this one by virtue of the light extending from God’s hand all the way to the earth below suggests a cohesiveness, right?—like the entire window is one continuous work of art—three in one, you might say.

This light originates from God, of course. So we’re not only talking about *actual light*—the “Let there be light” kind of light; but this also represents the “Light of the world”—the kind of light Christ spoke of—the kind that no darkness can overcome.

But particularly important for us today is the fact that this Light opens up God’s word to us. You see it shining brightly there upon the open Bible. I want to suggest that this Light is the Holy Spirit helping us understand God’s story and our place within it. The Spirit illuminates the scriptures and points us to Christ Jesus.

Notice also, though, how the light isn’t quite as bright in the lower half of the window. Do you see that? Art can have many valid interpretations, as we know. But since I’m preaching, I’m gonna give you mine. So, please feel free to disagree.

But the way I understand it, that light isn’t as brilliant because it’s reflected through us: fallible human beings—real people who sin and stray from God and don’t love our neighbors as ourselves as often as we should—people who abuse the Great Commission.

In fact, we can actually distort that light whenever we wield God’s word as a weapon—or when we inexplicably come away from scripture convinced that our job is to somehow put others down or make them feel less than. If we come away from this book convinced of anything but God’s liberating love, something inside us is way off and we are in desperate need of repentance.

Lord knows we’re never going to get it completely right every time. But if our goal in approaching scripture is to love as Jesus loved, then I believe we’ll get it right *most* of the time. If the lens through which we read is grace and the cross of Christ, then I believe the light we reflect into the world will come as close as humanly possible to God’s original brilliance.

In a world where tyrants thrive and bad news seems so loud and overwhelming, we long for God’s truth and the gospel of Jesus Christ to meet us at every intersection and around every bend. Imagine encountering the Holy Spirit in all directions and destinations. Imagine being open and attuned to the holy that makes every moment, every breath a reality.

Friends, I understand how the world can sometimes numb us to the good being done around us. I understand how injustice after injustice can weigh us down and question our participation in the struggle altogether. “What’s the point?” we might ask...

It’s been one of those days. You’re driving home from work and wondering, “Why do I even try, anymore?” And then, all of a sudden, you remember that text you got this morning from your daughter—the one that just reads, “Love ya, Dad!”

And then, while you’re stalled at a red light lasting way too long, you suddenly notice the bumper sticker on the car in front you—the one supporting that cause you thought no one else cared about but you.

The next morning after yet another rude awakening from your phone's alarm, you happen to notice the sunlight reflecting an odd shimmer across the room. In a dreamlike stupor, you make your way to the bookshelf and realize that shimmer is coming from the metallic silver words on the cover of that church hymnal you forgot you borrowed. And, all of a sudden, the rude light hurting your waking eyes transforms into the new mercies you see, morning by morning.

Siblings in Christ, I get it. I do. *And* I'd suggest that's exactly why our God created the world—created *us* in such a way that we can recognize the divine in everyone, in everything, everywhere—if only we're willing to notice it—if only our hearts are open to the possibilities.

In the end, after all, God will be God. God's always gonna be God: God the Almighty, all-encompassing Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

You know when you really think about it, since God is the beginning and the end, the possibility of encountering God really becomes an inevitability: Not if, but when. The question is how open we are to those encounters.

And, truth be told, no matter where we are on our spiritual journeys, no matter how open we are to the innumerable ways we can experience the Divine, God's love and grace will always be the First One to arrive and the Last One to leave.

I'll close with this...God the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End...

This week I found myself asking: the beginning and end of *what*, exactly? Strangely enough, the Bible doesn't explicitly say. And perhaps the question's unnecessary but I think it can be helpful. I think the answer's got to be *everything*. Everything: the beginning of the day and the end of the day, of the week, of the year, minute, the first day of school and the last day of school, the beginning of Scripture and the end of the Bible, the start of our career and the final moments of our retirement party, the first day of our diagnosis and the end of our illness.

Everything, in everyone, everywhere we look, every moment, every step, every breath, everything. That's God. And that's good news.

Amen.