

A sermon preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Danvers, MA
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Matthew 3:13-17

Projection

Let me warn you about today's sermon: it's full of gossip! It is also full of a very human approach to understanding this spiritual entity we all call God. The idea to do this sermon came to me in an epiphany when I was reading the scripture we are using today.

Do you remember the human behavioral exercise which has a circle of people, the first of whom is given a note that has several sentences; then the sentences but not the note are passed around the circle of say 6 to 12 people and by the time it gets to the last person the phrase has changed both in words and possible even meaning. This, of course, is what happens through gossip. Look, we all like to gossip because it's full of stories about ourselves. My goodness, we humans have elevated it to an art form where we publish grocery market scandal sheets by the dozens. There is something about gossip—its tantalizing nature—that makes it fun or just too hard to avoid. Of course, gossip can start so easily. I'm sure I could make up a story *I thought to be true* about one of you and within a short while, if it were believable enough, people would begin to think the story was actually true. Kind of like the fake news we're hearing a lot about these days!

Another way gossip works is for one person to have their perception of some encounter, which may or may not be accurate because there are two sides to every story, of course. But that one person starts telling other people something like, “many people are so upset,” when, in fact, it's just that one person who is upset *but they project* that feeling onto other people because, well, if I'm feeling that way so other people must be too.” Psychologists call that kind of gossip “projection.”

For some of you, this may be hard to take, but a lot of our Bible—both the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Scriptures, the New Testament—are filled with stories that were passed around from person to person. When you have ancient writings that are, first, based upon stories that were told—oral histories, if you will—and were never recorded by audio or video tape, there are going to be facts that are left out, embellished upon, manufactured, and just plain wrong. And, even today, with all our ability to record people and events with audio, video, or now digital means you cannot believe everything you see on Fox News or NBC Nightly News or read in the *Boston Globe* or the *Danvers Herald*. Electronic records can be edited and spliced in many different ways by people who hold inherent and even unconscious biases informed by their experience, racial attitudes, economic class, political and religious leanings. We all know now that people even created some fake news sites on the internet that probably swayed opinions about who to vote for in the last election. During wartime this is called “Psy-ops” or spreading “misinformation.”

Can you imagine just how much our Bible and its stories were impacted by the way in which we humans communicate with one another? Our scriptures contain stories that were never recorded electronically, that were passed down through the generations orally by many many storytellers, and then after years and years recorded and rerecorded numerous times by numerous scribes—all with their own unique biases—and then somehow, by a group of men with very

specific agendas got together and canonized the now written stories of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Don't get this wrong because I do hold that our Bible is a privileged, authoritative voice of our faith. But, *we have to do more than just read the text and accept it as gospel truth.* It is worthy of serious study and a guide of our faith.

My friends, if we hear gossip about someone, especially the kind that disturbs you, the best thing to do is to go to that person directly and have a conversation rather than just spread the story that someone told you. It's the same with the Bible. Scholars do their best to analyze scripture through several levels of scientific and academic analysis. But scholars can and do disagree on the meaning of scripture.

Everyone one of us must use discernment in order to understand and interpret the Bible stories. And just how do we discern the truth of the Bible and apply it to our lives today? Here is something I do: ask yourself questions like: Does this text reflect the God of love? Would the God I believe in do this thing? Does this story reflect what I know about the natural world? What was the state of knowledge of the natural world at the time? Do the stories match other prevailing stories being passed around at the time, or not? Or, does this supernatural event have some metaphorical meaning from which more truth can be derived than just the literal text? What is the historical and human context in which the story was written? Who was the community that it was written for and what were their problems? Is the story to be read as a history book or as poetry and metaphor?

There was a famous Jewish philosopher named Moses Maimonides who used to give this advice to people like us who read the scriptures and come away with just a little bit of wonderment or skepticism. He advised that the more outrageous something in the scriptures seemed to be the more you should, in your discernment of its meaning, believe there was some deeper meaning beyond just the literal text. The more outrageous the story the deeper you needed to look for the meaning the text was trying to convey to you.¹

In our text from the Gospel of Matthew this morning, even John the Baptist gets it wrong. Jesus was not coming to his baptism to get sins wiped away; he was coming to be baptized to show everyone about the God's love and grace that was upon him. Just like our little baby this morning who was baptized we were telling you all and the world that this child is living in God's grace and love. From all the things he had heard about Jesus he couldn't believe that Jesus wanted him, John, to baptize him! He even told Jesus at the river, "*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*" But when Jesus presented himself to John, Jesus had a very different idea about what he wanted done. John had a certain perception of Jesus from what he had heard about Jesus or what he himself believed about Jesus. But, Jesus had different ideas.

And, in an earlier Gospel lesson, we read the story how King Herod had been hearing about a new messiah who had been born and he feared for his kingship, his humanly power and throne. (³*When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;* ⁴*and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.*) Why was King Herod so "frightened?" How could he be frightened of a baby? By the time this baby would be old enough to usurp Herod's throne, Herod would probably

¹ Darlison, Rev. Bill. Sermon from Unitarian Church of Dublin, Ireland, 2007, *Podcast.*

already be dead. In fact, our story from Matthew tells us that Jesus was still a child when Herod died and then Joseph, Mary and Jesus returned to Judea from Egypt. Herod's fear was outrageous, right? His fear was certainly unfounded and no reason to slaughter innocent children just to protect his position.

In addition, how so very wrong Herod was about the kind of king this Jesus was to be. In addition to John the Baptist, even some of Jesus' disciples were very wrong about the kind of king Jesus would be. They "projected" onto Jesus the kind of king *they wanted him to be!* How very wrong so many people were in the time of Jesus about what kind of Messiah he would be. He would not be an earthly king-like ruler, or a political ruler like Herod or Caesar who would achieve his greatness through military might or sovereign decree. Jesus' leadership came from the light of God within him. And that light was a light of a servant or someone who served and sacrificed his life even unto being branded a criminal and rebel just so he could live out his calling from God to preach the Good News.

Perhaps the lesson for us on this Second Sunday of Epiphany is that there is really a whole lot more truth and light in our Bible than just the literal words written on the pages of our scripture. We Christians miss so much of the truth and meaning if all we do are take the words of the scripture for granted or as just facts. It's not the facts of the story that can inspire or transform or cause you to have epiphanies—but rather, it's the deeper meanings underlying the text that can have a profound impact upon your spiritual life. So the next time you hear some gossip or pass along some gossip or read the Bible look behind, beyond, around, and through the words you are hearing or reading and look deeper about what the meaning behind those words are for you and for the person telling you the story. Remember, sometimes the gossip says more about the person's state of mind who started it or about the author of the text than it does really reporting any particular facts or history. In this New Year, let's give God more credit for inspiring stories filled with deep meaning, metaphor and symbol that although they were written thousands of years ago can still transform our lives today. In this season of epiphany, epiphanies are alive and well today. And God is still speaking. Amen.

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