Sermon copyright © 2011 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

Epiphany 4A
Peace, Seattle
January 31, 2011 epk
Micah 6:1-8, Matthew 5:1-12

REMEMBERING WHO WE ARE

When a blond-haired man with a walrus mustache wandered out of Seattle's Discovery Park in 2009 with no memory of who he was, the staff at Swedish Hospital dubbed him "John Doe."

He wore pressed khakis, an expensive dress shirt, a blue blazer and had $600 hidden in his sock. He was fluent in English, French and German, and had an encyclopedic knowledge of European cultural history, but he was frightened and confused. He didn't know where he was born; how he came to Seattle or why.

His doctors at Swedish didn't think he was faking it, but they didn't really know how to help. **"If you don't have an identity,"** the man said, **"it's very difficult to survive."**[1] **Amnesia.**

In the lesson from Micah, the setting is a courtroom and the issue is the collective amnesia of God's chosen people.

O MY PEOPLE, cries the LORD, WHAT HAVE I DONE TO YOU?
IN WHAT HAVE I WEARIED YOU? ANSWER ME!

God laments that his people have forgotten their identity as children of the promise; forgotten the covenant; forgotten God's demands for justice and compassion. Everything they do is measured against the value of the almighty dollar:

- Rulers render judgments for a bribe;
- priests offer insight for a price;
- prophets give oracles for money. [Micah 3:11]

And God is bewildered by it all.
Maybe, if tell them where they came from it will jar their memory.
Maybe if I remind them how I brought them from slavery into freedom,
maybe if I remind them that I am their God and they are my people,
maybe if I remind them of how they are to live, they will wake up."

The people have forgotten their "story" and, in doing so, have forgotten their saving God."[2]

It's not that God's people don't go to church any more. They do.
In fact, the sacrificial cult based at the Temple is working like a well-oiled machine.

And it's not that there's isn't enough money to go around. These are prosperous times.

It's that the connection between worship life and real life, between sacred gatherings on Sabbath and holy behavior during the rest of the week have been lost; the ethic of community life has been set aside in favor of "me" and "mine."

[1] For the fuller story, explore the series of articles on Edward Lighthart in the Seattle Times, beginning with this link: http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/html/localnews/2009694070_johndoe20m.html
[2] Carol Dempsey, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010) p. 292.

Sermon copyright © 2011 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

God's people have a bad case of amnesia.
So God has called a public inquest to make his appeal, and put the people of God on trial.

The words from the end of this passage—verse 8—are familiar to us; even, beloved.
They distill the whole Judeo-Christian ethic in one sentence:

> GOD HAS TOLD YOU, O MORTAL, WHAT IS GOOD; AND WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE OF YOU BUT TO DO JUSTICE, & TO LOVE KINDNESS, & TO WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD?

Powerful words, indeed. But they are made less powerful when we separate them from the prophet's indictment, frame them, and hang them up on a wall, or make them a feature of our personal piety and leave it there, forgetting that they are calling a whole community to accountability.

Let's not forget that the command to do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God, is uttered as the antidote to the amnesia that precedes them.

What's the upshot, for us?

- Don't forget where you came from. Don't forget that you've been washed in the waters and claimed for God's purposes. Don't forget whose you are.
- Don't forget the way of life and community to which you have been called.
- Remember to connect this Sunday life with the rest of the days of the week.
- But, dearly beloved, if you do forget…if you do forget…know that God will remember, and call us back again and again and again.

In her book JESUS FREAK, Sara Miles, a one-time non-believer who became Christian after meeting and eating Jesus in the Eucharist, writes how the food ministries she helped establish [quote]
"HAD EVERYTHING WE NEEDED BECAUSE WE GAVE EVERYTHING AWAY."
"We were invincible," she writes, "because we offered power and authority, just like food, to everyone." [3]

Recalling visits she made to food programs in other parishes, Miles found herself recoiling at times at what she witnessed:

> "At one cathedral I visited, I saw ten clergymen eating lunch by themselves in a huge, light-filled hall, while below them two hundred poor women, children, and men crowded into a shabby cafeteria half the size for meals on plastic trays. The staff there told me that the regular noon Eucharist attracted fewer than a dozen worshippers: apparently, nobody had ever thought to invite the people breaking bread at the soup kitchen just fifty yards away, to make the connection between the two events. The bread of heaven and daily bread were utterly different things.
>
> "At another Midwestern parish, I toured a beautiful, locked, empty sanctuary with its beautiful locked empty parish hall. The church's food pantry was housed underground in the basement, where supplicants for once-monthly grocery bags waited for hours in a cramped hallway to have multiple documents checked. The elderly church volunteers complained that it was an effort for them to carry the food downstairs. They never considered using the parish hall or the sanctuary, though, to feed people. "It's so sad," said the woman who showed me around. "Nobody comes to church anymore."[4]

[3] Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010) p. 38.
[4] Ibid p. 39, 40.

Sermon copyright © 2011 by Pastor Erik Kindem, Peace Lutheran Church, Seattle, WA. All rights reserved.

When Jesus comes on the scene in Matthew's gospel and starts to get people's attention through his preaching and teaching and healing, touching people in their every day lives, they begin to listen and to follow, and he sits down with them and with his words draws the clearest picture about the way things are in this domain he'd been sent to proclaim and to live.

> "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he says. "Blessed are the meek the mournful the merciful… blessed are the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted, for theirs is the kingdom of God."
> [Matthew 5:1-12]

God's people, you see, had forgotten who they were…again.
And Jesus had come to remind them. And you know what? He's still reminding us today.

Now I think the people of Peace do a good a pretty good job connecting what happens here on Sunday with what happens the other days of the week.

When we leave this space and head downstairs for our potluck and meeting, and look back at 2010 and look forward to 2011, you can decide if you agree with me.

Ultimately, of course, it's not my opinion or yours that matters. It's Christ's.

Can we carry the spirit of the meal we share up here with us as we go downstairs and make decisions about what our mission will look like this coming year? Of course we can; of course we will.

In all of this, in all the words and symbols of our worship life up here, and all of our conversations, our deliberations, our motions and presentations and decisions down there, and in all of our encounters, our decisions, and our actions the rest of the days of the week, God is calling us to do one thing:
to remember who we are.

PRAYER:
God of boundless love and deep justice, in the waters of baptism you have given us a name, and called us to embody the love of Christ within our own lives and the life of this community.
Keep us from forgetting who we are. Save us from amnesia.
And inspire us with your Spirit to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with you. Amen.

`