

Sermon Epiphany I, Year A 2017

Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 10:34-43

Psalm 29

Matthew 3:13-17

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After the beautiful snowfall, we are gathering on the first Sunday after the Feast of the Epiphany that we celebrated on Friday. Epiphany means manifestation and refers to the light of the world at the birth of Jesus. On Epiphany, the 12th day of Christmas, we celebrate the arrival of the wise persons who followed the star from the East to the stable in Bethlehem. There they found Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus and presented their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We have moved from Christmas to the season of Epiphany, the season of light. Jean Vanier, founder of the L'Arche communities (community homes for persons with significant developmental disabilities) wrote this about love and light. "To love someone is not first of all to do things for them, but to reveal to them their beauty and value, to say to them through our attitude: 'You are beautiful. You are important. I trust you. You can trust yourself.' We all know well that we can do things for others and in the process crush them, making them feel that they are incapable of doing things by themselves. To love someone is to reveal to them their capacities for life, the light that is shining in them." (Quoted in *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*, Claiborne, et al, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010, p. 58)

This season of Epiphany moves rapidly. Quickly Jesus' life has progressed. The gospel writers tell us very little about Jesus' childhood. In Matthew's gospel after the wise men present their gifts, Joseph is warned in a dream of Herod's evil intent. Joseph took Mary and Jesus and fled into Egypt in hiding until the evil Herod died. Whereupon another angel appeared in a dream telling Joseph that it was safe to return. Matthew then introduces John the Baptist which quickly leads to our lesson that began with the 13th verse in the third chapter. We move from the wise men quickly to the beginning of Jesus' adult ministry. And Jesus' ministry begins in the waters of baptism.

As we are introduced to the adult Jesus, he has come into the wilderness where he encounters his relative, John the Baptist. Jesus had no need for baptism for remission of sin. But Jesus wanted to fulfill the expectations of the faithful at the time, all of whom were coming out to be baptized by John the Baptist. So, Jesus imposed on John and was baptized. When he came up from the water, Jesus saw the Spirit descending like a dove. But then the voice from heaven spoke to everyone gathered there revealing the identity of Jesus. “**This is** my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Not “You are my Son” as the other writers expressed, but “This is my Son.” This is a dramatic proclamation! The voice from heaven for all to hear. This was not a private event. But a crowded public event. This is something the church has come to understand. Baptism is not a private ceremony but a sacrament that involves everyone gathered for an event of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit that cannot be controlled or confined.

An event that brings the Spirit into our lives in new and more powerful ways. For many of us this Spirit of baptism was introduced in infancy or childhood while for others baptism occurred in adulthood. As those baptized as infants or children grow up, at some point, hopefully they have the opportunity to reflect upon their baptisms. They can examine the promises made for them. If they choose, they will be able to affirm those promises made for them by parents and godparents. Their affirmation is done before the bishop. We call this mature affirmation of faith, confirmation. So, if you were baptized in infancy and have not affirmed your faith as a teen or adult, a mature confession of faith, we invite you to prepare to do so. If you affirmed your faith in another tradition, we invite you learn more about the Episcopal Church. After doing so you may choose to be received by the bishop into this stream of theological and worship tradition, the Episcopal Church. Speak with Kim or me as we are in the process of planning classes for adults interested in confirmation, reception, or reaffirmation of their baptismal vows.

In a few minutes, we will once again refresh our memories of baptism as we say again the words of our Baptismal Covenant.

Baptism doesn’t protect us magically. But it does empower us with the Spirit who is as close as our lips and breath. The Spirit is actively present to us.

Now God is active in our lives whether baptized or confirmed or not. That is the message of the Psalmist who says in Psalm 139, “You have searched me out and known me... You trace my journeys and my resting places and are acquainted

with all my ways.” (Psalm 139:1,2) “For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” (vs. 12).

God is an ongoing creative force for good in the world. That activity will continue as well. God is intimately connected with his beloved creation and all people whose mission is to be co-creators with him. Our role is important.

This has been a tough few weeks in the life of St. John’s. We are in the midst of the bleak midwinter as the hymn says. Our sense of loss has been magnified by a week of rain and overcast winter skies. These times can shake our outlook on life as it is continually influenced by the daily events in our lives. Whether these events are large or small.

At times like this I am strengthened by remembering the impact baptism has upon us. As we emerge from the waters of baptism, God calls to each of us as well. God says that we too are his beloved. You are the beloved of God. Marked as Christ’s own forever. Nothing that happens to you and nothing that you do can remove this divine connection with the divine love. Or as the Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Romans (Chapter 8) expressed it, “nothing, neither height nor depth nor things present nor things to come, nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.”

In the bleak midwinter, I need to be reminded of this. I need to be reminded many times of my ongoing connection to the divine love. I need to be reminded when things are going well and reminded when events are not going well. Because at both times I can be deceived. My vision can be limited or restrained.

As we began the New Year, I was reminded by none other than Ann Landers of the wisdom of (Connection to Ann Landers 1/1/2017 column.) 12 step recovery programs. They remind participants again and again to face just one day at a time. That is all we are given and all we have to keep our focus on. We have significant choices to make each and every day. We can choose how we approach each day and the events therein. No one knows what any day holds. But our connection with the divine can alter our attitude and outlook and can make all the difference.

Each morning we can begin the day focused on the love of God that surrounds us. We can remember the waters of baptism as we immerse ourselves in the shower. I begin each day with the words of the psalmist, “This is the day that the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it.” Rejoice that we have lived to see this day. With this family, this church, this setting and roof over our heads. Begin each day asking God for wisdom and insight, for help and strength to meet

the inevitable challenges that will come our way. In school, at home, at work, in the community... we know the challenges are out there. As Scott Peck once began a book. "Life is not vacation." But we are accompanied with and by a Spirit that can sustain us and will carry us through. Because we are not alone. Baptism is our reminder. And each time we renew our baptismal covenant we too are encouraged that the Spirit of God is with us, empowering and enabling us to live faithfully. Open to the Spirit. Carry this experience with you and know and remember it every day from now on: "You are the beloved of God."