

January 9, 2021
Epiphany 1-C
All Saints', Littleton, NH
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Isaiah 43:1-7
Acts 8:14-17
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
Psalm 29

Today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany, which is always celebrated as 'The Baptism of the Lord'. [point out the stained-glass window at the back of the church showing this scene] In the baptism account in Matthew, Mark and Luke there is another 'showing' or Epiphany in that God speaks to affirm Jesus as son of God; and a voice is heard from heaven, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Behold, the Epiphany----Jesus is Emmanuel, "God with us".

In the Lukan account this morning there is the physical manifestation of the descent of the Dove. In Rabbinical teaching, God's voice was said to sound like the cooing of a dove, so maybe that was what Luke was referencing by including this in his baptismal story. ('Cooing', what a wonderful sound image for the voice of God!) And what a contrast to the voice of God we get in the Psalm this morning. Frankly, I like the idea of God's voice as a cooing dove, but usually I have to ask God to coo a little louder since the message isn't coming through as clearly as I'd like sometimes! And, for Christians, of course, the dove has come to symbolize the Holy Spirit.

The first thing that is interesting, and has caused theologians to stumble for centuries, is the very fact that Jesus went for baptism.....for, if we say that he knew no sin and that, in fact, he is part of our Trinitarian God, why should he need baptism for the remission of sins. Matthew deals with this right up front in the words coming from John's mouth---'no, I have need to be baptized by you!' But Jesus says that it is necessary 'to fulfill all righteousness'.

Now this is an enigmatic phrase in itself! What if Jesus had said, 'Yeah, you're right, let me baptize you'?! Biblical scholars give a lot of credence to this actually being a real event in some form largely because it is counterintuitive to what one would think should happen, i.e., it would have made better theological sense for Jesus to agree to John's insistence that Jesus baptize John. Perhaps Jesus was doing this to show the pattern, the model of what all who follow him must do---in the ritual washing we promise to 'repent and return to the Lord', or as mystics would say, to let go of the false self and awaken to the true self. And baptism, along with the idea of repentance, is also the rite of inclusion into the family of God. Perhaps this is what Jesus was doing -- passing through the waters of baptism to be included in the same family that we are included in.

Most of us, because we were baptized as infants, don't remember our baptism. This is why confirmation usually comes at a later date -- it is the rite of the church where we claim for ourselves what was promised on our behalf as children. It is the rite where a prayer is said that would 'quicken' the Holy Spirit that was bestowed in our baptism. In the early church baptism and confirmation happened together after a yearlong

preparation as a catechumen, and was performed by a bishop. They mostly became separated by an accident of geography and history – as bishops’ dioceses grew, it was harder to get around to everyone in a timely manner – they couldn’t just hope in their Subaru Forester and zip around the diocese, so baptisms were done by priests or deacons, and when the bishop showed up they would have ‘confirmation’.

The lesson from the book of Acts this morning is essentially the beginnings of the rite of confirmation. Phillip, one of the 7 men made deacons that we heard about last week, had gone to Samaria to preach the gospel and by all accounts was quite good at it. He had baptized, but the Spirit had not yet fallen on the converts, so the apostles came from Jerusalem, and as Luke would have it, it sounds like the apostles had the power to convey the Spirit. To scholars this is all rather suspect for several reasons. For one, no man can control the Spirit, and there are numerous Biblical accounts where the Spirit showed up even before baptism. But we have to remember the religious politics of the day also.....Samaria was the nation of the Samaritans, those who the good Jews of Jerusalem thought were heretics (remember Jesus’ teaching about the good Samaritan which was scandalous to his Jewish audience---that a Samaritan could be good!).

The early church certainly was having that ‘epiphany’ of understanding that the gospel was meant for everyone everywhere, thus Phillip’s mission to Samaria; but in some sense, Luke’s telling of the story of the apostles coming to convey the Spirit seems to imply a need for a religious central authority. Churches, like ours, that have bishops in the apostolic succession, have used this scripture to bolster the argument for

episcopacy the way we understand it. Well, I don't have anything against bishops (most of the time!), but I'm certainly glad that the Spirit is not dependent on them!

Just previous to this passage in Acts is actually a nice little corrective to placing too much power in the hands of people, or, better, misunderstanding how God uses people. It is the story of Simon, a religious leader and something of a well-known magician in Samaria who had a big following. He listened to Phillip's preaching and converted, but then he offered to buy the power that Phillip had (Phillip had also been doing great works of healing among the people). But of course one cannot buy the power of God.....and this particular sin has come down through the centuries known as 'simony' – the definition of which is the selling of ecclesiastical position or sacraments.

In my study this week I came across a great quote in the *Interpreter's Bible* that commented well on this problem....

With the arrival of Philip, however, Simon found things quite different, for Philip performed miracles. There is a great difference between magic and miracles. Whereas magic is a human attempt to control and alter the natural course of events for someone's own benefit, a miracle is God's use of God's own laws in extraordinary ways to bring to pass God's own purposes.....There are always people who are looking for magic rather than miracle. They pray in order to make God do what they want God to do, whereas true prayer is the surrender of our will to the will of God so that we will do what God wants us to do. There is always the temptation to use the sacraments of the church as magic rather than miracle, as techniques by which we control the forces that are greater than ourselves, rather than the means by which we become channels for those forces.

Likewise there are always people who think that they can use religion for their own purposes. One cannot buy religion any more than one can buy love. Religion, like love, is an end in itself. It cannot be sought in order to make us well, or to make us happy, or prosperous. It can be sought only for itself; but once found, it overflows in by-products of health and happiness and prosperity. It cannot be manipulated or

controlled by our personal desire. Those who pretend to such controls are charlatans. They often have a large following and the only thing that can stop them is the truth. (Interpreters, Vol. 9, p. 11-113)

In some sense this contrasts an infantile notion of God when people try to manipulate God, and a mature understanding of our relationship with God as us coming and yielding to God's Spirit in our lives – not us trying to manipulate God, but opening our hearts and minds to be used by God! In the rite of confirmation, that is what we are hoping and praying for that day and every day thereafter.

Several years ago there was an article in a newspaper, interestingly enough, that did a good job of reflecting on this kind of person open to the Spirit. The article was all about finding those people who live in a state of God's grace, which is reflected in their graciousness. The author writes:

There's a radical equality at the core of grace. None of us are deserving of God's grace, so it's not dependent on social status, wealth or intelligence. There is equality between kings and peasants, the prominent and the unheralded, rule followers and rule breakers.

If you find yourself in the company of people whose hearts have been captured by grace, count yourself lucky. They love us despite our messy lives, stay connected to us through our struggles, always holding out the hope of redemption. When relationships are broken, my wife Cindy told me, it's grace that causes people not to give up, to extend the invitation to reconnect, to work through misunderstandings with sensitivity and transparency.

You don't sense hard edges, dogmatism or self-righteous judgement from gracious people. There's a tenderness about them that opens doors that had previously been bolted shut. People who have been transformed by grace have a special place in their hearts for those living in the shadows of society. They're easily moved by stories of suffering and step into the breach to heal. And grace properly understood always produces gratitude. (Peter Wehner, NY Times, 12/24/18, p. A19)

Well, our world could use a lot more of grace and graciousness. Our leaders in Washington can definitely use a lot more of this. But, I too would be well-advised to hold up God's grace before my eyes, a constant Epiphany, if you will, that it might have the converting effect of leaving me open to the graciousness of the Holy Spirit. In doing so I will be continually growing into what was said and done at my baptism and confirmation. Each of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus are called to this path illumined by the grace of God. As in the last verse of the gospel hymn:

Baptize us with your Spirit, Lord, your cross on us be signed,

That, likewise in God's service we may perfect freedom find.