

January 8, 2023
Epiphany 1-A
All Saints', Littleton, NH
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 29

Acts 10: 34-43

Matt 3:13-17

Today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany. Very early on the Eastern Church focused on the Epiphany of the Lord as the event of his baptism – which we have in the gospel this morning. However, the Western Church focused the Epiphany on the coming of the wise men from different countries as the first and principal event of Epiphany – of the revelation that Jesus is God's son and his mission was for the whole world. In our calendar we celebrate the coming of the wise men on the Feast of the Epiphany, January 6th, but then we celebrate the baptism of Jesus the first Sunday after the Epiphany. Both, of course, have their point to make.

Part 2 of the Epiphany in the western church, as it were, happens about 30 years after the wise men when Jesus goes to John to be baptized – the story from Matthew this morning. 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, but 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'. 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. 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.

And then, after the baptism, the great Epiphany – the heavens opened, a dove appears (an Old Testament symbol of God and the Spirit of God) or the Spirit ‘like a dove’ descends on him, and a voice is heard from heaven, “This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” In Mark and Luke the writers have it “You” are my son; so in Matthew the message is definitely addressed to those in attendance. Behold, the Epiphany----Jesus is Emmanuel, “God with us”.

So what does this mean for us? How do we understand the Epiphany of God in Jesus? Most of us, because we were baptized as infants, don’t remember our baptism. I certainly didn’t understand what was going on then....and I suppose I’ve been growing into my baptism ever since; and daily seeking to understand better the Epiphany of God in Jesus – trying to understand what it means for us to be ‘epiphanized’. If we were baptized as an infant, our Confirmation was, as it were, meant for us to ‘confirm’ for ourselves what was done on our behalf by parents and godparents at our baptism.

Well, we don’t stand in the same relationship to God as Jesus does, but there is something in this story we need to try to hear for ourselves too. In this story God speaks and says that Jesus is beloved by God as God’s son. If we take our baptism seriously, we should be reminding ourselves that we are beloved by God too. As St. Paul said, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” The immutable, unchangeable character we now have through our baptism is our beloved nature to God. This is probably one of the most difficult things for us to understand and embody – our beloved nature. When I send out my emails to the parish I

always address you – “All Saints’ Beloved”. You are truly beloved by me, but more importantly, you are beloved by God.....really, really beloved!

Yesterday when we came home from our walk I was reminded of this through our dog. Say, do you know what the best thing is about being dyslexic? Answer: you get to worship Dog! Man, we love our little Aspen and she really loves us and she won’t let us forget. Doug and I try to sit quietly and she comes up to us putting her head in our lap and then one paw....maybe even two to indicate she wants to crawl in our lap. And all of which to say, I love you, I really, really love you and won’t you love me back?! Now, if that isn’t just like Dog....uh, I mean God!

This reminded me of a poem by Hafiz, the Sufi poet from the 14th century. Sufism is the mystical branch of Islam. The Centering Prayer group finished reading a book of his poetry not long ago. Here is the poem that came to mind when I was contemplating how much God loves us.

Saints Bowing in the Mountains

Do you know how beautiful you are?

I think not, my dear.

For as you talk of God,

I see great parades with wildly colorful bands

Streaming from your mind and heart,

Carrying wonderful and secret messages

To every corner of this world.

I see saints bowing in the mountains

Hundreds of miles away

To the wonder of sounds

That break into light

From your most common words.

Speak to me of your mother,

Your cousins and your friends.

*Tell me of squirrels and birds you know
Awaken your legion of nightingales – Let them soar wild and free in the sky*

*And begin to sing to God.
Let's all begin to sing to God!*

Do you know how beautiful you are?

I think not, my dear,

*Yet Hafiz
Could set you upon a Stage
And worship you forever!*

This is one of the greatest challenges to our awakening in Christ – to really believe how deeply loved we are by God. To be, as it were, ‘epiphanyed’! Last week after our time in silent prayer, Victoria said to the group that her ‘epiphany’ was realizing how deeply each of us and our whole world could be changed if we really awakened to how much God loves us and lived in the light of that! Amen!

In another book I’ve been reading, *Contemplating Christ: The Gospels and the Interior Life*, by Vincent Pizzutto, an Episcopal priest, I came across a passage that seemed to sum up both Christ’s love for us and, by extension, how that becomes our vocation as Christians.

At the center of the Christian [contemplative] life stands the scandal of the cross, the chief witness and paradigm of Christ’s posture toward the very world into which he emptied himself: arms outstretched, vulnerable, and embracing the darkness that sought to destroy him. The scandal of this descent is the scandal of a God who has transgressed the abyss between divinity and humanity and is revealed in Christ not as emperor of the universe but as “crucified love.”The self-emptying of Christ crucified and risen lays bare the way of the Christian

[contemplative] whose vocation it is to confront darkness both within themselves and in the world not through resistance, or worse retaliation, but by absorption. For Jesus, the consequence of this posture was his own death, which thereby rendered impotent the very darkness that railed against him. The practice of [contemplative] prayer is thus a kind of death-to-self through which each of us discovers that "it is no longer I who live, but Christ in me." [Gal. 2:20] (p. 38)

And the things we do in church are meant to remind us of this way of love and our vocation to live it out in the world. Through baptism we claim our beloved nature, and in the weekly spiritual multi-vitamin in the Eucharist---we behold again the mystery of Christ with in us. Close your eyes and hear God saying this to you....

*Do you know how beautiful you are?
I think not, my dear,
Yet I [Hafiz]
Could set you upon a Stage
And worship you forever!*