

1 Epiphany, Yr. A

January 8, 2017

Isaiah 31:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

Today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany. And as you know from many past sermons, epiphany means manifestation, or showing and it's the season of the year in which we celebrate the many ways in which God manifests himself to us, especially through the life of his son, Jesus. One way to think about epiphany and about the wider and wider manifestation of Jesus is to think about a rock thrown into a quiet pool – it creates ever widening circles. So, if we think back to Christmas, we had the first manifestation to Mary and Joseph. It was then extended to the shepherds and then to the wise men and now, today, to John and Baptist and those others gathered on the banks of the Jordan River. In the Acts reading we hear of that further extension to those first Gentiles. Our faith tells us that those circles continue to spread and will do so until all the world comes to know God. But there's yet another way to understand this widening. It starts with the identity of Jesus, but then it goes wider still so that we, too, can come to the understanding of OUR identity in God, then wider still so we understand that same identity for everyone and then perhaps deeper, rather than wider, we come to an understanding of the deep meaning and joy of it all.

There are a couple of textual questions that we should address before we get into what I think of as the core message of these readings. The first one concerns the Isaiah reading. What we just heard is part of the Suffering Servant passages and scholars have debated for years about who the servant is, without coming to consensus. Some think that the servant was a specific person, perhaps Cyrus, the Persian King who freed the Israelites from exile to go back and rebuild the temple. Some think it's the nation of Israel and some, using a later Christian lens, think it's meant to be a prophecy about the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. What I think everyone can agree on, however, is that the passage is a picture of the kind of life a person that is called by God should be living – and that, of course, is each one of us, so the passage has direct relevance to each of us. That person, God's servant, called, anointed and empowered by God's spirit, is God's agent to bring God's justice to the world. Justice as used in the OT isn't the kind of justice we think of when we think of our legal system. Instead, it's that original state of being that God intended from the creation. Remember the image of the peaceable kingdom. The Hebrew word is *mishpat* and it means the kind of order of compassionate justice that God created and desires - a state upon which the wholeness and peace (*shalom*) of the entire universe is dependent. And that state of justice comes about when God's people obey God's will. Obedience brings peace and harmony that affects the entire creation; disobedience, for its part, brings chaos that also affects the entire creation. So the servant of God is to live and work for justice patiently, non-violently and mercifully. The passage gives us a picture of tender care for the vulnerable, for ideas that are coming into fullness, for small efforts struggling to come alive. It's clearly NOT justice imposed by force.

This is tied to a problematic line in the gospel; what does Jesus mean when he tells John, who's objecting to baptizing Jesus, that they should proceed "in this way to fulfill all righteousness"? If we step back a minute, we'll remember that the early church had a problem with Jesus being baptized by John, because John was preaching a message of repentance for sin and the water

cleansing the body was a sign of the inner fact of conversion and repentance. But as the early church began to articulate its belief that Jesus was himself God, the question arose as to why he would need to repent at all, because surely he was without sin. Why would he want to get into the water with all those sinners, with all that riffraff? But, if you think about it in connection with the Incarnation, by virtue of the fact that God has become human, Jesus is already in the water (or should I say the soup) with us. He's thrown his lot in with us – Emmanuel – God with us! We're reminded of that letter to the Philippians:

Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave becoming as human beings are and being in every way like a human being...

So Jesus wasn't safe and dry on the shore shouting encouragement, or shaking hands, or helping people out of their wet clothes and passing out warm towels. I recently saw the pictures of the polar bear plunge in Lake Michigan on New Year's Day – I'm clear that I'd be on the shore handing out those warm towels! Not Jesus: he was in the water with them. With us.

So, in that context, we have this conversation between Jesus and John. With John basically saying, "What are we doing here, exactly, and why are we doing it?" Jesus' response, about the fulfillment of all righteousness also has had scholars scratching their heads. Some think that this has to do with Jesus' obedience reversing the disobedience of the original Adam. Others think that Jesus, in becoming fully human and in identifying with all humanity, represents us in the right relationship with God, which is what the OT means when it talks about Righteousness. And most agree that Jesus is demonstrating righteous human behavior: this is how a servant of God responds to God – by obedience in doing God's will.

All of this is important, of course, but I read something else in preparation for this sermon which I think gives us a deeper insight into what's going on. And that comes from the Gospel of Philip, which didn't make it into the NT canon. But in that gospel, the writer, in talking about Jesus' baptism, says that Jesus rose up out of the water laughing. Laughing, can you imagine? It's a wonderful image that gives us the sense that Jesus came up from under the water filled with joy. I've talked before about the concept of joy. That it's more than mere happiness which can come and go depending on the circumstances of our lives. It's a way of seeing the world that recognizes pain and suffering and despair but somehow transcends all of that. I often think of it as "singing alleluia through our tears." The dictionary defines it using terms like exaltation and ecstasy, but I think this transcendence is more on target. It captures the sense that no matter what's going on, we can trust the truth that God has overcome it all; that in the end, God wins. You perhaps know that I did a retreat for the women of Shepherd of the Bay and, following our Bishop's lead, I spent time talking about delight. I shared with them one of my favorite cartoons, of which you know I have many, that shows a weary pilgrim, tattered and worn, following a sign that points to TRUTH. But coming back in the other direction, apparently already having seen TRUTH, is a fellow dressed like a clown and laughing his head off. Surely the meaning there is that the truth he discovered was joyous. And you'll remember my mentioning seeing the TAP production about Jacob Marley's Christmas Carol. When Marley finally figured it all out, not so much with his head as with his heart, when he finally GOT IT, he started to laugh, first a bit

quietly and even creakily (because, of course, he hadn't laughed in a long, long time) but then more and more whole-heartedly.

I think that's what baptism, ours as well as Jesus' is all about. I'm wondering if we don't miss the power of baptism because we are baptized as infants and even that is done rather minimally, although we do a bit more than, as one tradition does it, sprinkle a few drops of water from a rosebud. But you may know that in the early church, baptisteries were often dug into the floor. The candidate, after a long period of preparation, would approach the pool, disrobe as a sign of leaving the old life behind, and descend into the water. The priest would completely immerse the person three times – in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The person would ascend and put on a new white robe as a symbol of having died to the old self and put on the new life of Christ. Remember Paul talking about baptism – that in it we die with Christ so that we will be raised with him. In his words: We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death has no more dominion over him..." Maybe that's what Jesus saw when he was in the Jordan; maybe that's why he rose from the water laughing – joyous, exultant.

Most of our baptisms occurred long ago. But perhaps we could prayerfully re-imagine them, maybe even re-live them. Imagine ourselves going under the water, being cleansed, leaving our old lives behind, coming up out of the water laughing and then hearing God's words of love: you are my beloved child, in you I am well pleased. Amen.