

Epiphany 1, Yr. B  
January 7, 2018  
Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11

The scriptures for these past couple of weeks are really powerful and central to our faith, so I think it wouldn't hurt to look again at them, with their themes of light and love and, in this morning's scripture, being the beloved of God.

Last Sunday we heard that awesome beginning of John's gospel, part of which, talking about Christ was: "What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world." Light and life. And we celebrated that on Christmas.

Yesterday was the feast of the Epiphany. More light. We remember the story of the wise men, traveling far, guided by the light of the star, letting that star illuminate their path, searching for the King of the Jews. One author says that these "dazed Gentiles were the first to note the cosmic movement that had transpired, the pivot on which the fate of the world would hinge." They saw the beginning of the new creation.

In this morning's first reading from Genesis, we hear that the first thing that was created was light – light that was the basis for life and order in the cosmos. Light that would become the symbol of Christ. I read something about light written by a photographer. He says, "Light is a powerful metaphor for the Spirit of Christ among us. I do a lot of photography which is sometimes described as 'painting with light.' It is the light reflected from various surfaces that creates the picture seen through our eyes and which is registered as an image in the camera. But the light is far more than simply something to see by. The light of the sun is converted to energy that is stored in plant life and from there to animal life. In fact, life would be impossible without the sun....So the metaphor works. God provides the light of the sun and the light of Christ, without which life would not be possible." (*Synthesis* 2012) There's the connection again, light and life.

But light is not only about life, it's also about the quality of life. By the light of Christ, our paths, like those of the wise men, are illuminated. We see what the world is about, we see where we are and we see where we need to go. Because like the wise men, we're on a journey. Our journey is to move deeper and deeper into the heart and vision of God and, for most of us, that will require long years and much change and growth. Remember the priest I told you about some time ago who said that he thought our journey from baptism to the heart of God could be compared to the pickling process that a cucumber goes through. Starts out as a cucumber but after spending quite some time in the brine, it becomes a pickle. Not quite the same quality metaphor as that of a star, but a metaphor none the less!

Today's Gospel tells us about John appearing in the wilderness and that "people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized...confessing their sins." Don't you wonder why all these people were going out to John? Why, do you suppose? I'm thinking there were a variety of reasons: some went because they thought of him as another Elijah, and thought maybe he was announcing the

Messiah; some went because they heard his message of repentance and realized that they DID need to turn their lives around. Some probably went because they were curious and it was the most interesting thing going on at that moment. One preacher says that these were probably teenagers resting on the hoods of their camels. But don't you think that some came because they were ready for change – maybe they were motivated by hope that life could be different or better, some probably came out of real need. They definitely didn't come because he had a warm and fuzzy message – remember the bits about “you brood of vipers” or “even now the ax is at the root of the tree”? And John challenged them to change – because people who heard him then asked WHAT THEN SHOULD WE DO? And so his advice – if you have two coats, give one away; if you have more than enough food share it; if you're a tax collector, don't cheat; if you're a soldier, don't use intimidation to get your way. So part of the message was that it's not enough to be baptized, you have to then put that into action in your life.

I recently watched a video that a friend sent me of a sermon preached by the president of Fuller Theological School, Mark Habberton. One of the things he pointed out was that a really valid criticism of the church, coming especially from the “nones” who have walked away, is that the church says good stuff, but doesn't live it out. He told the story of being a pastor in Berkley when a young man showed up in church. He was pretty noticeable apparently, since he had tattoos of flames along the sides of his face and others going down his neck. When they talked, the young man said that he had been a traveling musician, but was now back and working on a PhD. He had been trying churches, he said and then he asked, “If I were to come to your church, would I find Jesus people, or just church people?” Quite the question isn't it? Living as Jesus people means, first of all, knowing Jesus – knowing how he lived, what motivated him, what his vision was. And then following him.

We get the beginning of all that in this baptism story, because as he's coming up out of the water, he hears what we all want to hear, “You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased.” It's been pointed out that you could trace all of Jesus' ministry back to this moment, to this naming, this acceptance, this statement of love and that everything he did after that – all the healing and forgiving and feeding and teaching, was about letting everyone else know that they too are beloved children of God. That's what the kingdom of God is about – that understanding and then living out the truth that everyone is beloved by God. That's what Jesus is saying when he tells us that it's not enough to love the people that love us; instead we need to learn to love even our enemies. The preacher I mentioned told a story about this as well. He said that, shortly after 9/11, some Muslim scholars came to Fuller. They needed a place to pray several times a day, so the President at the time gave them his office. There was some concern that that action would alienate donors. At one point, Dr. Labberton asked a person who had been imprisoned by some fanatical Muslims how he felt about Muslims using the president's office. “Giving them the use of an office?” the man replied. “What's the big deal about that? We're supposed to be giving them our lives.” Labberton suggested that that's probably not the best place to start, because it really is a journey, after all and we can't start at the end. Perhaps, he said, we could start with someone who's just annoying – we all know someone like that, surely. And then maybe we can move on to someone who's downright irritating. And then maybe people who aren't like us – people of a different gender or race, or economic bracket, or religion; maybe even somebody that doesn't like us. Because the temptation for all of us is to stay

where we are, in a life bounded only by self-interest. Jesus' vision of the Kingdom is completely different – it's that vision where all are accepted and all are loved. (one parenthetical remark here which is a reminder that this kind of love isn't a feeling, but an act of will in which we recognize the image of God carried by each person and the fact that that person is cherished by God.)

He told a story from the Bible that has always been one of my favorites. When Jesus and his disciples came down the mountain where Jesus had delivered what we know as the Sermon on the Mount, they were met by a leper. As you know, lepers were truly THE OTHER. They were supposed to keep their distance and call out the warning that they were unclean. But this leper did something different; he came up to Jesus and said, IF YOU CHOOSE, YOU CAN MAKE ME CLEAN. What would Jesus do? He shouldn't touch the fellow because he'd be not only ritually unclean, but he'd be in danger of contracting the disease himself. And you'll remember what he said and did: I DO CHOOSE. BE MADE CLEAN and he touched the man and healed him. The vision of the sermon on the top of the mountain followed by action consistent with that theology.

What does this say to us? As we remember our baptism, as we renew our baptismal promises, we're challenged to be constantly transformed, growing ever-bigger Christ-like hearts. We've heard that same voice of God telling us how beloved we are and we are called to live out that love in the world, loving as God loves.

Henri Nouwen put it this way: "The one who created us is waiting for our response to the love that gave us our being. God not only says, 'You are my beloved child,' but also asks, 'Do you love me?' and offers countless chances for us to say 'yes'." Amen.