

2 Epiphany, Yr. C

January 20, 2019

Isaiah 62:1-5; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

I don't title my sermons, but if I did, this morning's title would be WHAT'S IN A WORD? Since it might not be obvious why I would pick that title, here's the connection: you may recall that not too long after the church began, some people, probably beginning with someone like St. Anthony of the Desert, were inspired to withdraw from what they saw as a sinful society, move to the desert and live lives of prayer and solitude. Some of their writings are preserved as are the stories of some of their lives. One thing we know is that other people, who hadn't moved out into the desert, but who were serious about their spiritual lives, would come to these Abbots and Ammas for counsel. A Benedictine nun who was once a spiritual director for me, told me that one of the customs would be for the seeker to ask for a word, as in, AMMA, GIVE ME A WORD TO LIVE BY. The word was given by a saintly person who knew the seeker well, and who understood his or her gifts and needs, the passion that motivated them in the spiritual life and, knowing all that, could give

them just the right word that would provide direction and focus. So, with that as a kind of ordering device, let's look at this morning's scriptures.

The Isaiah passage was written after the Israelites had returned from exile in Babylon. As you might imagine, they were filled with hope to be going back home. But when they got there, they found the countryside and Jerusalem still in ruins. Perhaps even more trying was the fact that they couldn't get together with the people still living there to begin to restore the devastation. There were, just as we heard in the reading to the Corinthians, factions. There were those who had been exiled, and those who had never left the land and those who hadn't been born at the time of the defeat by the Babylonians. So, I'm guessing that, if they were to put their experience into one word, it would be DESPAIR. But Isaiah speaks different words to them, words of reassurance and hope. He even changes the adjectives that were used to describe them – no longer Forsaken or Desolate, but My Delight is in Her and your land Married. And he uses the image of a marriage and the delight of that

occasion of unity as a metaphor for their relationship with God.

Marriage and wedding imagery is prominent in today's readings and, thinking of all the things that can happen during a marriage ceremony (most clergy could probably write a book!) I read a story about one such ceremony and everything was going smoothly until the bride and groom exchanged a kiss and at that point, a 4-year old uttered his one word, heard by all: one word, "Yuk!" I'm guessing he changed that word as he got older.

And if we think of marriage and weddings as metaphors for the unity that God wants for us, then the reading from Paul's letter is also relevant. You'll remember that the Corinthian community was extremely diverse and pretty contentious. One of the things they divided over was who had brought them into the Christian community (I belong to Cephas, or I belong to Paul, etc.) Another thing that divided them, which is the subject of this reading, were the spiritual gifts they had received. You'll remember that they had been ranking the various gifts and decided that THE gift, the only that really

counted, the one that set the recipient apart and above everyone else, was the ability to speak in tongues. I may have told you about being in Eagle River in a conversation with a fellow who was a member of a start-up church. He wanted to know if I had been baptized by the Holy Spirit and I, thinking, well, OK, I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, said yes, that I was so baptized. But then he said, “Ah, but can you speak in tongues?” And it turned out that, in his opinion, that was the mark of a REAL Christian. Corinth in the 1st century, Eagle River in the 20th! So, if Paul were to give members of his community a word to live by, it might be unity, or community, or maybe the common good.

I want to talk about John’s Gospel using this same lens, but first, because tomorrow is Martin Luther King Day, I’d like us to think about his guiding word. My first thought was that it would be “justice” but when you think about it, words like justice and peace and righteousness are all kind of pulled together into the one Hebrew word “SHALOM.” Shalom is a vision of social wholeness, a state of well-being for all, where everyone has access to the goods of

creation intended to meet the needs of all. The scriptures insist that if there is to be well-being, it won't just be for isolated individuals – instead it's the prosperity and security granted to the whole community – rich and poor, young and old, powerful and dependent. We're all in this together and the blessings of shalom are either shared by all or enjoyed by none. Remember King's sermon in which he said he had a dream, a vision in which former slaves and former slaveowners would be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood...in which children would live in a nation where they would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. That one day freedom would truly ring, that all of God's children would be able to join hands and sing Free at Last. So, justice, or freedom or peace. In another place, Isaiah said: The effect of justice will be peace/shalom, and the effect of righteousness, quiet and trust forever. Then my people will abide in peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings and in quiet resting places. (Is. 32:17-19) More succinctly put, you see this on bumper stickers that say, IF YOU WANT PEACE,

WORK FOR JUSTICE. It's also in the BCP in the prayer of St. Francis, which we'll sing later.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow your love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
Where there is sadness, joy.

Peace, justice, righteousness – all sweeping concepts, but all belonging together in that one word, SHALOM.

And then, looking at the gospel this morning. John doesn't call what Jesus does miracles; rather he calls them signs, because they point to something beyond themselves; they point, as is fitting in Epiphany, to an understanding of who Jesus really is. So, what would be the word encapsulated in this part of the Gospel? We have the marriage again, as metaphor for union, but we also have the amazing abundance. John tells us that there were 6 jars, holding 20-30 gallons each. Someone calculated that that would mean something like 605 bottles of

wine and, given the steward's response when he tasted it, it wasn't like Raspberry Ripple. So perhaps the word here would be ABUNDANCE. But I have an alternative suggestion. Remember a few weeks ago when we talked about the difference between happiness and joy – that happiness is more shallow, an emotion dependent on what the external circumstances are at the time. Happiness and suffering cannot co-exist. Joy, by contrast, is deeper. Joy survives in spite of suffering, transcending it, finding meaning in it. Joy is an attitude toward life that helps ground us, no matter what's going on; it gives us a solid place to stand in order to achieve meaning and wisdom. So perhaps JOY would be the word.

The poet Mary Oliver died this past week and in one of her poems, she said, most fittingly for this scripture:

“When it's over, I want to say of my life/I was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom taking the world into my arms.”

So there are some other words to live by: amazement and wonder, and taking the world into our arms.

On a lighter note, I read that once Johnny Carson had an 8-yr. old boy on his show. He was on because he had rescued a couple of friends from a coal mine near his West Virginia home. In the course of the conversation, it became obvious that the boy was a Christian, so Carson asked him what they were learning in Sunday School. Turned out it was this water into wine story. Johnny asked the boy what he took from that story. The reply was, "Well, I think, if you're going to have a wedding, you should probably invite Jesus."

Inviting Jesus. A good idea, whether you're having a wedding or not. I'd like to invite you this week to think about what word or words one of those desert fathers or mothers would give you, were you to ask. What word enlivens you, excites you, names your reality or your passion, what word is food for your spiritual journey? It can be a blessed exercise. Amen.