

1 Epiphany, Yr. B

January 10, 2021

Genesis 1:1-5, Mark 1:4-11

I wrote this on Thursday, just one day after the horrific events at the capitol. I was reminded of two things. The first was Benjamin Franklin's remark when asked about the form of government that had been established: a republic, he said, now see if you can keep it. And the second was that story about the Cherokee elder telling a youngster about the two wolves warring inside him. The one was about evil: greed, narcissism, anger, fear, resentment; the other was about goodness: love, compassion, empathy, generosity. And when the youngster asked which wolf would win, the elder responded, "The one I feed." That story can apply on both the individual level and the larger societal level. I ask you to keep these two things in mind as we look at the scriptures and how they speak to us today.

At first, I thought there was no way these events would be connected to the lectionary, but then I realized that they are indeed connected. The theme running throughout the season of Epiphany is LIGHT – and we hear that in the Genesis reading, when that's the very first thing created, when God said, LET THERE BE LIGHT. And we can connect that also to Mark, when Jesus, who is to be the light of the world, is named and revealed, as the beloved son of God.

So, light, certainly in Genesis, physical light. The light of the sun is converted to energy that is stored in plant life and from there to animal life. Life would be impossible without the sun. But also, just as powerfully, light in the sense of enlightenment, of

understanding, of coming to know who God is, who we are and what our lives should be.

Light allows us to see. And what we saw on Wednesday was, I suppose, something we should have seen coming. We saw division, anger, lawlessness, fear, desecration. I'm sure all of you saw the same pictures on the news that I did. Several of them stick in my mind: the one of the fellow with his feet up on Pelosi's desk, the one of the guy carrying out the lectern, or the one of our elected representatives running for cover. There was another one that I found especially upsetting. It showed one man holding a big cross and another covered in a Trump banner, crouching, as if in adoration before that cross. That was a clear indication of the attempt by some to coopt the message of Christ by tying it to white nationalism. It was, to my way of thinking, sacrilegious. This had absolutely nothing to do with Christianity!

We saw something else on Wednesday. We saw the further ripping of the social fabric. Bishop Budde of the DC diocese issued a statement reminding the rioters, and all the rest of us, that we have foundational principles requiring a respect for law, a demand that we care for our neighbors as we care for ourselves, and we have rules and traditions that require a peaceful transition of power between administrations. Those foundational principles are what hold us together as a nation. And we saw something else: how fragile our civilization and our social contracts are.

There's another tie to the Genesis reading here. We talked a couple of weeks ago about the voice of God, creating what was spoken. So, Genesis says: "God said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light." But we humans can also create with our words. We are so inundated with words that we can miss that point. But

think of words like I DO at a wedding, or I LOVE YOU, or less positively, I HATE YOU. We all know how powerful those words are, how they are able to create the reality that they speak. This was on display on Wednesday. When the leader of the country uses language to incite followers, or continually misleads by talking about fraudulent elections - those words have power. Former President Bush issued a statement in which he pointed out that the passions (of the rioters) were inflamed by falsehoods and false hope and he went on to say that responsible leadership knows that the country is more important than the politics of the moment.

There's another point to be made about language. It's a point so basic that I probably don't even need to say it. But it is that the very purpose of language is to communicate and, most importantly, to communicate the truth. I remember when I was practicing law, saying to one of my colleagues that it would all be much simpler if people just told the truth. Even then, there would be misunderstandings and mistakes and misconceptions, but we would surely be much further ahead in our efforts to create a just and equitable society. Just telling the truth. How hard can that be? Much more influential than my saying that to a fellow lawyer, you'll probably remember Immanuel Kant and his categorical imperative saying that it was surely wrong to behave in a way that undercut the very function for which something was designed. He said it better than that, of course, but the point was that language was meant to connect, to communicate, to build trust. And when one lies, those lies undercut the very purpose of language itself. It's wrong and it needs to be named as such.

And Mark's Gospel and his story of Jesus' baptism also has something to say to this moment. Jesus hears a voice naming him

as God's beloved son. It's really naming his vocation. He's to live out what that means and, by doing so, to show us, we who are also the sons and daughters of God, what that means and what it looks like. All the Synoptics say that, following the Baptism, Jesus goes into the desert. And there he's tempted by the devil – tempted because he has to figure out what this means for him. What does it mean to be the beloved child of God? The chosen one? He's tempted to turn stones into bread: you're hungry? Feed yourself; use your power for your own benefit. And then he's tempted to be spectacular. Go ahead, throw yourself off the temple, God will send an angel to save you. The temptation to be special, to get attention, to be the center of attention, to get special treatment. And then, finally, that temptation to power. I'll give you all the kingdoms of the world if you will just worship me, the devil says. POWER, seductive, addictive, almost impossible to relinquish. And yet, Jesus refuses all those temptations. That is NOT what the leadership exercised by a child of God is about. Instead it's about loving service. The temptation is to grab power and use it for self-aggrandizement, for posturing, for self-enrichment. NO, he says, to all that. The life God wants is the opposite of all that. It's about self-emptying, and self-sacrifice.

Vocation. When I was in seminary, one of the ethics professors wrote a short piece about politics as a vocation. Already then, there was a certain cynical and dim view of most politicians. His argument was that if one saw politics as service, as working for the common good, that was a valuable vocation, one that could further the vision of the kingdom of God or in secular terms, the vision of a just and equitable society. There's a tie here between that kind of leadership and the respect due to the leader's fellow

citizens. That tie was voiced on Wednesday by a Senator who said that our republic functions because of well-informed citizens and a leader shows respect to his or her fellow citizens by telling them the truth. That, he said, is the burden and the duty of leadership.

But we each have a vocation as well and perhaps our primary vocation, our primary identity, is voiced in the baptismal promises we made and often repeat. That we will resist evil; that we will seek and serve Christ in all persons, that we will love our neighbors as ourselves and that we will strive for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being. That's the truth that brings light into the world. And that's the light that will illumine our paths as we walk together into a better tomorrow. Amen.