

EPIPHANY I – 2022

May the words....

When we changed this liturgy from Eucharist to Morning Prayer late this week, we had to choose which two of the three appointed lessons to hear and learn from, and that was a hard choice. Of course, the gospel from Luke was to be one of the readings, particularly since it is the baptism of Jesus, a whole new dimension of spirituality to Jesus, to the people of his time, and to us. More on that later.

The reading from Acts 8, though brief, describes a turning point in the life of the early Church. The Samaritans had been baptized in the name of Jesus, but the apostles, when they heard about it, decided that was not enough. Jesus had been baptized in the Spirit; they themselves, on the day of Pentecost, had been baptized into that same fellowship of the Spirit, and so, they thought, anyone coming into the faith would have to experience the same spiritual gift. They sent Peter and John to Samaria, and those people received the Spirit. That's a brief but wonderful story, and it has clearly marked the path of faith and spirituality that the Church has followed ever since.

Instead of that, I chose the passage we heard from Isaiah, a passage with which I am not entirely comfortable. I don't deny that it is in what we call the approved canon of scripture, and our ancestors have been reading it since the time it was written, some hundreds of years before Jesus. There are some lovely images in it, especially the first half where we hear the words which became that very well-loved Cursillo song, "Be not afraid." Listen: "I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume." Wonderful! It is a profound statement of faith that the God who is over all, loves this

people, and though they may experience pain, they shall not be harmed, they shall not be destroyed.

That is at the center, the core, the heart of Jewish theology and teaching, this doctrine of chosen-ness. I have no problem with that. I accept and give thanks for the many stories in Hebrew Scripture which repeat that very theme: with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, each in his turn, with Moses and Joshua, with the prophets, especially Elijah and Elisha, with the kings, particularly David and Solomon. Each of those is yet another manifestation (or epiphany) of God's Spirit in direct and powerful conversation with these men, reminding them of the original encounter with Abraham and God's presence with them throughout their personal journeys and the journey of this people, over the land and over time. I accept those encounters as revelations of the very presence and power of God. I also see them as the will of God, of God wanting, with all God's heart, to love and support and protect this people against all adversity, and to help them to live not only in the Land of Promise, but more, to live the Promise itself, a promise of peace and harmony where hope triumphs over fear, where love triumphs over estrangement, where we can recognize with joy that we humans are all of one blood.

The second part of this passage reveals human thinking, much more than God's thinking, God's intentions. Those early Hebrews cannot imagine a world in which they can be chosen and others can be chosen as well. From the beginning of Jewish thought and writing, we see the fear which plagues the human mind: is there enough room in God's heart to really love all of us? That was the tension between Cain and Abel, between Esau and Jacob, between Joseph and his brothers. All of the early brother myths are about the great difficulty we have accepting God's love for the other, for any other.

We have good reason to ask whether there is enough room in God's heart to love all of us, we who are created in the image of God. We ask that because so much of our thinking is based on what we know about ourselves, and we know that we find great limitations within our hearts to love others. We look to justify ourselves when we want to dismiss someone's worth, when we want to write them off, when we want to consider them less than human.

I want to point to a question in our 1979 BCP which I see as one of the most important sentences in that whole wonderful book. It is in the baptismal office, which we use at confirmation, and which we use every time we renew our baptismal vows. Only God knows how many times I have asked this question of a congregation in almost 17 years as a bishop, renewing such vows almost weekly in church after church. Here it is: "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" Fortunately, we do not have to lie; we get to reply, "I will, with God's help." There is no other way we can do it!

WILL YOU SEEK AND SERVE CHRIST IN ALL PERSONS? First of all, that means we have to believe that Christ is in all persons. Not just those we are related to (or at least most of them, on a good day). ALL PERSONS. Not just the rich, the good-looking, the funny, the warm-hearted; those who are easy to love. ALL PERSONS. Not just those who are of our own kind, the same color skin, the same degree of intelligence, the same language, the same hair texture, the same mental attitudes and value systems, the same religion and expressions of that religion. ALL PERSONS. Not just those who behave well and don't mistreat others, don't abuse anyone else or any animals, not just those who care for the environment in the way they live, not just those who are sober and sensible and nice. ALL PERSONS.

Let's go back to that passage from Isaiah for a moment: God gives the Israelites an epiphany, a revelation of God's being in the universe and in relationship with the Hebrew people: "I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior." Up to that point, I am just fine with this passage. It is what happens next that I believe reveals/discloses not the reality of God's heart, but human thinking or understanding of God's heart—or shall we say, "misunderstanding of God's heart"? Here God says, "I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Saba in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life."

The author and later editors of this passage—and many others—reveal their smallness of mind, of heart and faith, that the chosen-ness of Israel means that other people are expendable, they don't count the same to God. It's so easy and comfortable to think that way, to assume that being chosen, being the descendants of those who were originally chosen, that God is on our side, that when we are against something, God is against that, too, that God hates on our side!

That is where the polarizing influences in present-day human society are taking us—not just here in America, but everywhere around the world where humans believe they can hold onto their hatreds and prejudices with one hand and hold onto God's hand with the other. This is where we need to remember that God is a jealous God, for hatred of others is a religion, is a faith, is a spiritual way of looking at life—not healthy, but something that gives us energy and a certain type of self-justification. God is a jealous God, who will not give in to our divided loyalties, who will not hate on our side!

In this context, I want to look at the passage about Jesus' baptism in Luke's gospel. This is new. Incredibly new! God has not acted this way before, coming down at the prayer of one man to bathe another in the light, the power, the fire of the Holy Spirit. Think of it: bathed in fire! It

sounds like a mixed metaphor, and perhaps it is, but that does not make it any less true. There are four words in this passage that are consistent in Matthew, Mark and Luke—all three gospels. They are: “the heaven was opened,” or, in some translations, “the heavens were opened.” The writers each capture the sense that eternal time and observable time (Kairos and Chronos in Greek) are intersecting with each other. It happens three times: here, in Jesus’ baptism, later, in our gospel at the end of Epiphany during Jesus’ Transfiguration, and later still, when Jesus dies on the cross and the veil of the Temple, covering the Holy of Holies, is torn in two. Each of these events is an epiphany, a manifestation of God, a moment when God very directly enters this time to make something new, to reveal yet a further dimension of God’s love and God’s intentions for humanity. Here it is a revelation of the person and power of Jesus and his relationship with God the Creator, Son and Beloved. Each of these is to claim our attention and to claim our loyalty.

From here we have to look at the whole of Jesus’ life. Nowhere does Jesus express the thought that someone can live outside of God’s love, even when a person’s actions are clearly outside of God’s love. That is so difficult for us humans to believe, yet that is the reality that God gives us to believe every day. Again, there is only one way: WITH GOD’S HELP. *Amen.*

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