

The Baptized

Today, we mark the beginning of another season in the calendar of the Church: Epiphany. As I mentioned last Sunday, the Feast of the Epiphany falls on January 6th each year, the date that Christians for centuries have remembered the visit of the magi bearing their gifts to the Christ child. But unless you grew up in one of the cultures that has made Three Kings Day a key holiday, like Lea Mortelmans or Rev. Manny Santiago, Monday likely came and went for you without much thought of gold, frankincense and myrrh or any other epiphanous symbol.

So as we celebrate the first Sunday in Epiphany, I think it appropriate to pause and consider the meaning of the season. We're going to give our "three kings" pride of place for the remainder of Epiphany. They will serve to remind us of some key concepts over the next two months. First, there is the literal meaning of the name of this liturgical season: Epiphany, from *επιφανεῖα*, "manifestation." As Christians, we remember during this season that Jesus was God made manifest, visible and present to humankind. Each of the Gospel readings during this season centers on how Jesus was made known or made himself known as God's truest self-revelation. The story of the magi or kings reminds us that those who are truly wise recognize him, that all human power bows down before him, and that he came for all nations and peoples, not only the children of Israel. Our "Three Kings" banners will also serve to remind us that we are called to bring our gifts to Jesus, to dedicate to him and to the One he called "Father" the best of what we have and what we are.

The Gospel story that is traditionally read on the first Sunday after the Feast of the Epiphany is the story of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan by John. This is a story with special resonance for us as members of the Baptist Movement. Our beginnings, however you trace them, are keyed to the practice of believer's baptism by immersion. Although this was reason for persecution of Baptists and Anabaptists in the bad old days, now Christians from other denominations are happy to learn from us about our increasingly widespread rite. In fact, a longtime friend of mine from the Episcopal tradition used photos of some of Good Shepherd's recent baptisms to teach her confirmation class this morning.

But let's set aside the old arguments about the timing and types of baptism this morning and look at deeper and more universal messages in this story. How would it have sounded to Matthew's original audience? To which Old Testament passages did he connect his version of these events? And what is the message for us, both in Matthew and in the text he drew upon? Like Jesus, whatever our tradition of Christianity, we are "the baptized" and God calls on us to fulfill the same calling that was upon Jesus in our own unique ways.

Many scholars believe that Matthew wrote his version of Jesus' life to be read by Jews who had come to follow the Way of Jesus or by Christians who were attempting to explain their faith to Jews. This accounts for the many citations of what we call the Old Testament in the Gospel According to Matthew. In this story, Matthew records something that appears in the gospels attributed to Mark and Luke as well. At the moment of Jesus' baptism, those present experienced both a visual and an aural manifestation of God: "And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" This utterance draws on multiple passages from the Old Testament, most particularly from the Isaiah verses which I read

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earlier. In fact, in his paraphrase, “The Message,” Eugene Peterson makes the allusion easier to see by conforming Matthew’s language to Isaiah’s. If you look at the words accompanying the image on the front of the bulletin, you’ll see what I mean. “This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life,” picks up the final phrases from Isaiah’s “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.”

I believe that the connection between these two passages, which has been picked up by those who developed the Revised Common Lectionary, is significant. Whether these are indeed the words that Jesus and others heard at the time of his baptism or whether they are simply the words that followers of Jesus came to associate with that moment of his being revealed as the Anointed One of God, the Messiah, the Christ, these words point to important truths about Jesus and God’s calling on him. This Isaian passage had so much resonance for Matthew as he told the story of Jesus, in fact, that he quoted it in its entirety later in his gospel, in what we know as chapter 12, verses 18 through 21.

Let’s look at what Matthew chooses to associate from Isaiah to Jesus in the baptism story. Jesus is “chosen” by God and God “delights” in him. Those two attributes are incredibly important in and of themselves. They put Jesus squarely in the category of those to whom God’s people need to pay attention. In the history of Israel, God has singled out others for service, chosen them and been delighted in them. There was Abraham, chosen to be the one man who would follow God to a new place in the world, establishing a family and eventually a nation dedicated to the service of the One True God. There was Jacob, chosen over his brother Esau to continue the family’s tie to God and to father the progenitors of the twelve tribes. There was Joseph, chosen from among the twelve brothers to suffer exile at their hands only to save them from starvation later on. Moses the lawgiver, Joshua the general, judges, prophets, and even kings were chosen by God to advance the plan of salvation through Abraham’s descendants. Perhaps most cherished in the memory of the Jews was David, the king after God’s own heart. God had delighted in him and now came Jesus, the Beloved Son in whom God delights.

These are all good reasons to associate these scriptures with Epiphany, with the unveiling of Jesus as the Christ. But there is still more here if we follow the gaze of the scholars into the rest of the passage from Isaiah. How does this prophet, another of God’s chosen, further characterize the one in whom God’s soul delights? There are a couple of phrases that will immediately make us think of Jesus. Isaiah’s vision from God continues, “I have put my spirit upon him;” a statement that also prefigures the way in which Jesus’ baptism is remembered, with the Holy Spirit descending upon him “like a dove.” Through Isaiah, God also promises, “He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street.” Followers of Jesus came to understand this as a prediction of his trials before the Sanhedrin and Pilate in which, according to Matthew, Jesus was “silent” or “gave no answer.”

But some of what is revealed by Isaiah’s vision is equally descriptive of Jesus but falls into the category of that which has been inaugurated but not yet fulfilled. “He will bring forth justice to the nations... he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth...” these are promises for which we still await fulfillment. We follow the path of Jesus in part because we see in that path the way towards God’s justice but we know in our grieving hearts that justice is still far from universally pursued by humans.

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Then there are the descriptions by Isaiah which made perfect sense to Matthew and his audience which may fail by reason of time and culture to speak to us. In the vision of the faithful servant recorded by Isaiah and picked up by Matthew is this: “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” We are given at least one clue into the likely meaning of this archaic phrase by its use in Matthew 12, connected with a mention of how Jesus cured the sick people who came to him. The bruised reed and smoking wick are certainly vivid pictures of things that are damaged or that do not work correctly. If we extend those concepts to people, we get a good picture of the kind of person that Matthew knew came to Jesus for healing and hope: those who were damaged in body or spirit and those whose bodies and minds did not work correctly or simply those whose lives were not fulfilling God’s gracious purpose.

Rabbi Shlomo Itzhaki, the medieval French scholar known as Rashi, wrote a commentary on the Hebrew Scriptures towards the end of the 11th century. In his comments on this passage in Isaiah, he offered some suggestions about the bruised reed and dimly burning wick which he had found in the writings of earlier sages. “Jonathan paraphrases: The meek, who are like a breaking reed, shall not break, and the poor, who are like a flickering candle, shall not be quenched... The king will not rob the poor and will not break the poor and weak.” This also certainly connects with Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus, whom he remembers saying this: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth... Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

Clearly, Matthew saw in Jesus the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy about God’s faithful servant and for nearly two thousand years, Christians have agreed. The One whom we follow, the One we are willing to call Teacher, Master, Lord, is the one who matches this description. In Him we see the very picture of one who is gentle and merciful, the one who has established our cherished notion of justice. In Jesus, the Baptized One, we find the One upon whom the Spirit of God rested, the One in whom God was delighted. We are pledged to follow the Beloved Son.

We are pledged to follow him. We have made this pledge in our baptism. For those who experienced baptism as infants, that pledge was made on your behalf by others and you took it to your hearts in your confirmation. So, all of us must remember that we are pledged to follow Jesus, the Baptized, because we, too, are the Baptized.

Consider what this means: we are to follow him in the practice of mercy and gentleness. As we encounter those whose lives are characterized by brokenness and failure, we are called by God through Christ to act as agents of healing and reconciliation in their lives. Individually or together, we the people gathered as Good Shepherd Baptist Church cannot solve the crises of homelessness and hunger in our community. But we can offer what shelter we have to some who need it. We can buy a meal or give a few dollars to those who are hungry. We can smile and say “hello” to those asking for help. We can offer a hug to those who are lonely, even if they don’t smell very nice. We can invite them in and give them a cup of coffee. We can and we must act tenderly toward the bruised reeds and the smoking wicks.

We are also pledged to follow Jesus as those who work for justice. We must remember that the justice that Jesus worked for was not the punitive affair that our society has come to term

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“justice.” We all know the sound bites: “He was convicted and sentenced; justice was done... the perpetrator was apprehended; now justice can be done... she got what was coming to her; justice was done.” That is not the justice that Jesus came to pursue. The justice of Jesus and of the Church is the justice of restoration not the justice of punishment. The justice we are called to bring is the justice that sets things right, that heals. Sometimes, the bruised reeds and sputtering wicks are those who have transgressed as well as those who have been sinned against.

In the latter half of the Isaiah passage, God leaves speaking about the servant and addresses the people who will follow the servant: “Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” This, too, is a call for justice: to open eyes of the heart that have lost sight of morality and goodness. This, too, is a call for justice: to set people free who have become imprisoned by bad choices, by economic disparity, by addictions. This, too, is a call for justice: to bring light to those who cannot see the brightness of a future, who cannot hope, who are grown angry and hateful in their bitterness.

My brothers and my sisters, we are the baptized who follow the One who was baptized. Jesus calls us to follow his steps, to live in the ethic that he taught and lived. God calls us to follow in the way set for Jesus, a way of compassion and mercy and restoration. God calls *us* in righteousness. God has taken *us* by the hand and kept us. God has given *us* as a covenant to those who live apart from God.

In the season of Epiphany, we often remember Jesus as The Light of the World. We have many candles lit this morning to remind us of this. But we must also remember that *we* are to be the Light of the World. Jesus said so, in the verses that it is my custom to read every Christmas Eve before we sing “Silent Night,” which are also a part of Matthew’s gospel: “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.” Isaiah reminds us that God has given *us* as a light to the nations. Isaiah also reminds us that “the coastlands wait for his teaching;” for the teaching of God’s beloved One. In the absence of Jesus it is up to us, the baptized Body of Christ, to spread the Good News of God’s love and God’s forgiveness.

Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman was, like us, one of the baptized. *Ebony Magazine* named him one of the 50 most important African Americans in history. In addition to his work as a pastor and Dean of the Chapel at Howard University and Boston University, he wrote 21 books, one of which, Jesus and the Disinherited, was a major influence on Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his work. He also wrote a poem which may sound familiar to you:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,

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The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.

The season of Christmas has passed. Now we are in the season of Epiphany and the work of Christmas has begun. It is up to us, the baptized, to reveal the Christ who lives in our hearts to the world around us. May God grant us the courage, the will, the compassion, and the sense of justice to bring Christ's light to the world. Amen.