

Beyond Discipleship -- Epiphany1C

Epiphany is a day set aside to remember the awakening of all people to God's sojourn amongst humanity. When the traditional Day Of the Epiphany among Western Christianity, January 6 occurs on a Sunday, we celebrate it then. In years like this one, when Epiphany is on a weekday, we have the choice of moving it to an adjacent Sunday – that we did last week.

Why do we celebrate these things? Epiphany reminds us that the gospel, the grace and the glory of God are for all of humankind. "Go then," says Jesus, "and make disciples of all nations." But as our story today conveys, there is more to a Christian life than baptism alone. It is only when the Holy Spirit inhabits us, that we become apostles as well as believers. The institutional Church would have no discernable value if its disciples never made this move from hearts and minds into the hands and mouths of its people.

Today we celebrate and examine the baptism of Jesus. In the East, they don't bother so much with Epiphany, preferring to concentrate on Jesus' baptism in the Jordan that prompted a voice from heaven, according to tradition. The voice called out, "You are my son, my beloved. With you I am well-pleased." That voice was the Epiphany for whomever heard it.

Our framework for hearing all these stories in church is as follows: Each year, our readings for the Sunday after the Epiphany are the same, except for the Gospel reading, which rotates in a three-year cycle amongst Mathew, Mark and Luke. These have been called the Synoptic Gospels because they give linear and in many ways similar synopses of the life of Jesus. The Gospel of John, by contrast, contains many elements absent in the other three, and is not arranged as a chronicle of

Jesus' life. Many Christian denominations have decided to follow the same, or very similar arrangements of scripture readings, so on a given Sunday, Christians around the world – especially in the West -- are likely to be considering the same passages. We can also read them on our own -- whenever we like!

The cycle begins on the first Sunday of Advent, so last November 29 we began Year C. Next November 27, we'll start Year A again. Most of the Gospel readings in any given year are taken from the same gospel version, to facilitate our reception of each book as its own entity. In Year C, we read mostly from Luke.

In common with other peoples, the Hebrews used water for religious purification. One of the ceremonies by which new converts were admitted to Judaism was baptism. But there are striking differences between those ceremonies and what John was doing in the Jordan. John baptized everybody, not just Jewish prospects. He spoke in critical defiance of the leaders of the synagogue, and he taught that baptism was the way to prepare for the reign of God: "The Kingdom of God is at hand," he cried, not for participation in worldly activities. John's baptism of repentance created space for the spirit of God to enter people. When Jesus underwent John's baptism, this spirit was evident as a dove appeared, in bodily form, no less, and a voice was heard, "You are my beloved."

As we heard in our story from Acts about the Samaritans whom Philip baptizes, baptism creates the space, but for the baptism to have more than a sacramental meaning the baptized must grow to accept the Spirit and put it to use however she can. Yes, we have been baptized, but are we living as if that were so? is the question. Are we welcoming, listening to and acting upon the Spirit that has come into us, a Spirit that can defy and defeat any worldly power? Or did we just get wet?

Baptism is neither wholly a doctrine to be taught, nor merely an ancient ritual, unconnected to our daily lives. Baptism is the force whereby rebirth by water can open us to the Spirit who propels us into becoming what we had not been before: changed and prayerful people, the Body of Christ at work in the world. It opens us to spiritual maturity, and connects us with the rest of humankind – which are the same thing, after all. And, as John Donne so dryly observed, “When the Church baptizes a child, that action concerns me. For that child is thereby connected to that which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body whereof I am a member.”

Each of the synoptic gospels contains an account of Jesus’ baptism by John, and the differences among these three accounts are subtle, but important. Luke’s emphasis is on prayer. Frequently in his gospel, Luke shows us Jesus praying. This entire story of the baptism of Jesus is set in a context of prayer: As Christians, if we are to be like Jesus, however haltingly, we are likewise to be in prayer. Thus, throughout Luke’s other text, known as The Acts of the Apostles, we see the followers of Jesus in prayer. What begins with baptism is nourished and enlivened when the Holy Spirit fills our hearts with prayer. As Jesus welcomed the Spirit in prayer, so must we.

Are we disciples by virtue of our baptism into the Christian Church? Technically, yes. But are we also apostles? Do we also pray for the Holy Spirit to enter us, to show us the way and give us the strength to become those who go out and do God’s work in the world, whatever that may mean?

Henri Nouwen writes that “Praying means being constantly ready to let go of our certainties, to move on further from where we are now – spiritually speaking. Prayer will demand

that we take to the road again and again, leaving our houses and looking to new lands for ourselves and our fellow human beings. That is why prayer demands spiritual poverty, that is, the readiness to live a life in which we have nothing to lose, so that we are always beginning afresh. Whenever we choose this poverty, we make ourselves vulnerable, it's true, but we also become free to see the world in its true form. We have no need to defend ourselves, and we can tell out loudly what we know, through our intimate contact with the One who is the source of all life. It demands courage to make real the consequences of a prayerful life. Therefore, it is vital to remember that courage is also a gift from God for which we can pray."

Thomas Merton asks, "Are we really supposed to be the light of the world. Are we really supposed to be saints? How can we possibly desire holiness without making complete fools of ourselves in front of others? How many of us really believe sanctity is possible for us? But if we are called by God to holiness of life, and if holiness is beyond our personal power to achieve (which it certainly is), it follows that God must give us the light, the strength and the courage to fulfill the task."

Scholarly articles recently have depicted some of the prisoners being held in the American prison in Guantanamo, Cuba. One man in particular stands out, who has recently published a memoir of his time there. Arrested in his home country of Mauritania soon after 9/11/2001, this man ended up in Guantanamo, where he has been held ever since, undergoing horrific torture. The initial suspicions about him proved insubstantial, and the U.S. government has been unable to find evidence enough to charge him with any crime. He was cleared for release back in 2010, but so-called appeals of that decision have kept him in permanent limbo. He is still detained

in Guantanamo, thirteen years after his arrest, despite never having been charged.

Here's the rub. One of the ways his captors tried to break his spirit was to forcefully separate him from that spirit physically. He was forbidden to pray. Any time he was observed in an attitude, or posture or making a gesture of prayer, he would be beaten, blasted with noise or light, and forced to do something else. But they – we -- never succeeded in separating this man from God's grace. He is a Muslim, not a disciple of the Church, and thus would never describe himself as an Apostle, a conveyor of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But one thing is plain, the Holy Spirit entered and never left him. His prayers may have been forbidden, but they were never silenced. Despite the horrors of what looks a lot like unjust captivity, he knows that When he passes through the waters, Allah is with him will and through the rivers, who have not overwhelmed him. He has walked through fire, but the flame has not consumed him. In a recent conversation, this man says he holds no grudge against any of the people who held and hurt him (their names are all blacked out by censors), and that he dreams one day to sit with all of them around a cup of tea, after having learned so much from one another.

Heavenly Creator, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight. Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us to do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in your paths we may not stumble, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*