

“BAPTIZE ALL YOU CAN GET YOUR HANDS ON”

1 EPIPHANY – YEAR A – January 9, 2005

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Epiphany is the season of the year when we hear and read the Bible lessons that answer the question, “Who is Jesus?” The whole life of Jesus tells us a great many things about God. God chooses to be with humanity as one of us. God is one of us. This is what we call the doctrine of Incarnation. The season reveals to us the unique and wonderful God that dwells with us as one of us.

It started with the feast of the Epiphany (January 6th). The three wise men come bearing gifts. Do you remember what they were? The gifts were gold, frankincense and myrrh. Each one tells us something about Jesus. Gold was the gift for kings. We will come to know Jesus as the King of Kings. Frankincense was used for worship services in the Temple in Jerusalem. We will come to worship Jesus. Myrrh was the perfume used to anoint the bodies of the dead in Palestine. Jesus’ death will be very important to us.

Today, we hear the story of Jesus’ baptism. This too is important because of what it tells us about Jesus. We need to remember that when we see Jesus, we see God. Jesus will become the “model” for we Christians. He is the one we are to copy to draw closest to God! Jesus’ baptism story this morning marks the beginning of his ministry. Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit and embarks on the fate filled journey that will change our world forever!

There is a story about contemporary Christian singer, Ken Medema (Pulpit Resource, William Willimon, January, 2005). During a concert he said, “My little Baptist church in San Francisco is in big trouble. We’re Baptist, so we get all excited about baptizing anybody we can get our hands on. Well, these people showed up for baptism. We were so excited to receive them. They may have mentioned that they were different, that they had a different ‘orientation’ than ours. I don’t remember. So we did what Baptists do ... we baptize them!”

“Well, some other Baptists from other congregations asked, ‘what are you doing baptizing *them*? Don’t you know that they are sinners? Don’t you know that our Church doesn’t approve of their lifestyles?’ We replied that all of us are sinners too. The Church doesn’t approve of our lifestyles either! We’re Baptists. We baptize everybody that Jesus gets his hands on.” Isn’t that what we’re to be all about? Shouldn’t we baptize everybody we can get our hands on?

A week ago, I put out the sign announcing an “open baptism” today. It created some talk! At work, my wife was asked what the sign meant by a friend across the street at the Presbyterian Church. I told her to tell him that we are offering baptism to all the people we can. We had the baptisms of Cameron and Quinn, infants planned, but what about others? The notion of open baptism is meant to welcome people into our Church ... no questions asked ... just come on in! Colin responded and we have him here with us today. We’re offering Jesus Christ to others. It’s a beginning for them and us.

What does the Bible tell us about Jesus’ baptism today? We need to look at the passage from Isaiah first. Isaiah tells us what kind of “Messiah” God was sending. Matthew picks up on the understanding of servant in his gospel. The servant will bring peace,

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healing and justice. This is not the image of a military or political leader that the Israelites longed for in their day. This chosen one would be a “light to the nations”, meaning that he would be sent by God for all people, not just a few. Isaiah has a universal theme that Christianity will readily adapt.

Let’s look at Matthew closely. There is that revealing passage as Jesus comes up out of the water. First, there is a dove, the symbol for the Holy Spirit. Next, there is the voice, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17). First, we have the word “Son” that denotes the intimate connection that Jesus has with God. Next, there is the word “Beloved” that translates closer to our word “chosen.” The calling from God comes to Jesus to be a servant, the chosen one who will bring his mission to all the people of the earth.

The other part of the Gospel that helps us to understand Jesus is the dialogue between Jesus and John the Baptist. John hesitates to baptize Jesus. He recognizes Jesus as the one who he said was coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit. Jesus says let’s do it John, because of righteousness. Righteousness does not mean, “I’m right and you’re wrong...” it has to do with a right relationship with God. Jesus was the Son, he was right with God. He goes ahead with the baptism to begin his ministry, to identify with us, and to point us towards the way of a right relationship with God. Jesus is baptized for service. He is one of us, and we are called to follow him, to be servants as well!

There is a word that we use when we talk about both baptism and righteousness ... it’s covenant. The Hebrews were introduced to the first covenant when we hear God announce, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” Covenant talks about a relationship between humanity and the divine. Now that covenant comes into a new understanding. With Jesus we hear, “I am one of you.” Jesus is now the way for us to enter into relationship with God. Baptism invites us into an active participation with Jesus, following God and serving. God is faithful to us, Jesus shows us, now we are to respond.

As Jesus’ identity is revealed, he challenges us. Baptism is our commitment to be one with God in Jesus Christ. It is more than just becoming a member of God’s family; it is sharing in the very life and ministry of Jesus. Baptism is the beginning of our ministry. We are to share the same calling and spirit of Jesus ... we are to be one with Christ. We are to be servants, standing up for the poor, comforting the grieving, protecting the weak, and holding up the outcasts. Jesus’ life is to be our life as well.

Our baptism rests in Jesus’ baptism. The incarnate God reaches out to touch us. Through him, we become part of the love force that will change the world. Dr. William Willimon talks about baptism being the time we “remember who you are.” He says baptism is the Christians ordination into the priesthood of Christ. Each Christian is commissioned to share in Christ’s world. We are anointed, set apart ... to continue to be God’s light in the darkness of the world.

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Now, Christians, we are called to proclaim by word and deed our faith! I was amazed to hear that Americans have raised almost \$350 million, the same amount pledged by our government, for tsunami relief. It’s a good thing to help these people, but what about the others in need? What about the 13 million Americans living in poverty? I remember in the same paper seeing a political cartoon. It showed a plane marked tsunami relief flying over desperate looking Sudanese refugees who are lacking the necessities of life.

We live a scant few miles from the city named the most dangerous place in the country, Camden, New Jersey! How will we make it a better place? We already have the food ministry through St. Paul’s and the work we have done with Habitat for Humanity. We are talking with the Hispanic congregation of St. Andrew’s in Cramer Hill about partnering in the future. What else can we do to bring light into the darkness of that city? If we fail to do anything, we will find the violence and crime of that place on our doorsteps. It’s already in the next neighborhood.

By the virtue of our baptisms, we are called to be a community of activists. We are called to follow Jesus and continue his work. We are to preach, teach and heal. We are to serve, stand up for the poor, hold up the oppressed and be with those who are suffering. Jesus’ baptism story reminds us today who we are too. We are God’s servants bringing the message of hope and the light of God in the name of Jesus. Now, where will we serve?