

A HUMAN & DIVINE BEGINNING

1 Epiphany, January 10, 2010

Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield, NJ – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Today we enter into the season of Epiphany. The Biblical readings will unfold for us who Jesus is and what he means to us. It started January 6th, when we heard Matthew's story of the three wise men bringing gifts to the baby Jesus. There is something new even here. The Hebrew people's traditions and Holy Scripture spoke of God's agent, one who would come and save them. He would be one who would restore "the good old days", whatever those were! But Matthew has three gentiles, three non-Jewish seekers finding Jesus. This is our first hint that Jesus' coming is different ... he comes for all people ... not just some or a few. There is something different as this story unfolds.

Here we are today, with the story Jesus' baptism. It is a story found in all four Gospels and it marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry. But there are some interesting points to notice here. First, we hear John is preaching and baptizing in the wilderness. He was that wild man, out in the wilderness with a message that attracted people from all over. They came to listen, to hear about repentance, to be baptized. But the people had expectations; they wanted to know if John was the one who would fulfill their expectations.

John said, no. He said someone greater was coming. He used water, he sprinkled the babies with water ... but another was coming. He would use fire and wind to baptize the people! We know about wind, don't we? The wind chill this past several days shows us the power of wind. But we have come inside the church ... and we are seeking warmth. Jesus is the one who will come with fire ... and he will set us on fire!

What does this day tell us about Jesus? We know that he was one of us ... born into our world like us. Remember Christmas a few weeks ago? We celebrated the coming of God into our world as one of us ... as a human child! Jesus is very human. He is one of us. The presence of God comes among us as one of us! Now we see Jesus coming to be baptized ... coming like one of us to a beginning ... a new relationship with God. But the scene doesn't stop there. Afterwards, Jesus is praying (just like us) and the heavens open, a dove descends and a voice says, "Good job son. I love you." (That's my paraphrase!) Whoa! Jesus is the Son of God that means that he's divine!

So here we are given a story of Jesus. He is both human and divine! That's what's revealed to us today! And ... because of our baptisms, we share in the life of Jesus ... we are called to share both the human and divine ourselves! This new beginning of Jesus' is our new beginning as well. Baptism is not an ending point; it's a starting point. Unfortunately, people come and have their child baptized, and we don't see them until Sunday school, or confirmation class or even later for weddings and funerals. Baptism is about a living, ongoing and growing relationship with God through Jesus Christ!

Yesterday I officiated a memorial service in Egg Harbor. The funeral director called and asked if I could do the service. I said sure ... but she said, "Wait a minute, I have a strange request." I'm going ... oh? It seems that the woman was a Quaker, and that her children were Quakers and Buddhists. They wanted a spiritual guide, but not a religious service. Now I've agreed to do funeral services for anyone. The funeral director sometimes calls on

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me because she knows that I listen to people, and can weave their stories together with a faith story. I responded, “They do know I’m an Episcopal priest don’t they?”

Well, I stood out in the cold for a couple of hours. I had done some research on Quaker and Buddhist funeral traditions and practices. I knew some of Buddhism from my college days (and dating a Buddhist girl). It was striking to see some similarities between the two ... both believed in some kind of rebirth at death. For the Quakers, it could be resurrection or reincarnation. They believe the soul continues. For the Buddhists, the rebirth depends on your karma. You could back in another form as your soul moves up towards full enlightenment. If you lived a good life, you would come back “higher up” on the life scale. If not, you could come back as an animal or bug!

By the way, Christians do not have a doctrine of reincarnation. We talk about the soul continuing on in a new way, but we don’t get recycled. I found some prayers I could use, and figured out what I would do at the graveside. It was an interesting group of people. Each person spoke words about the person and laid a flower at the urn with her ashes. But there was not one mention of God or Jesus. How very Episcopalian! I waited till the family left, toss some earth on the urn in the ground and added my own “Christian” prayer.

But that experience helped me with today’s sermon. What does the Baptism of Jesus mean to us? It’s not just a one-time thing ... it is the beginning of a relationship. It’s about seeing in Jesus both us, humans, a God, the divine. We are called at baptism to follow Jesus. We are called to live life differently. We are to be people who live lives like Jesus: caring for the poor, seeking justice, being peace makers, living in community and embracing faith.

This unique experience for Jesus is a unique beginning for us. It promises us the presence of God. It holds out hope to us. We don’t have to be afraid anymore. In the midst of all of life’s challenges, we are assured that God cares and that God is with us! There is a new life, a new way of being held out in front of us. Jesus leads the way and we are to follow. Maybe when we can embrace this understanding of Jesus’, and our, baptism ... we can start to be transformed by this great love of God. We too move towards both the human and divine!