

Baptism of Jesus, Epiphany 1, 2011

Isaiah 42:1-9; Ps. 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

He had agreed to walk door to door in his neighbourhood to collect donations of money for the Arthritis drive. He had done it before and decided that those in the houses with odd numbers were more generous than those whose homes had even numbers. Nevertheless he wanted to meet more of his neighbours face to face and thought that a short and purposeful journey would fulfill his goals. Initially it did not go well. One woman greeted him with a litany of limitation – she did not have enough money for her own medical needs, much less have money left over for others. A second house owner was angry and wanted to deliver a rant about the current political party in power and the impact of its fiscal policies on his budget. No donations for arthritis. Why continue this journey? Would his envelope remain empty? What should he do?

At another home, the father of a young family spoke of how hard it was to make ends meet. The canvasser paused and thought about what he had been hearing at each door; needs and a need for someone to listen. He paused and had an epiphany moment. He explained that he was a member of a church in the neighbourhood, a church that offered an open meal once a month. There was no obligation to join or an agenda for anything, just a welcome to come, 'take a load off,' as my grandmother used to say, rest from the strains of life. He spoke about the shift in his thinking – "I realized I had something to give and I offered it." How wonderfully unexpected, a reverse mission, an opportunity for radical hospitality.

In an article for the Huffington post, Christopher Cocca reflects on this season of Epiphany saying that this season 'celebrated the inclusion that comes from God's manifestation in Christ and the revelation of that presence to humanity.' All who had been outsiders of one sort or another were welcome – magi, shepherds, neighbours. The story of God's movement is an invitation to continue that movement toward other. Born in a feeding trough, Jesus moves to other tables. The arc of this story lives in the faith of the church; Jesus always takes his place in the doorways of need.

Like the waters of baptism the faith story of the people of God flows from one place to another. "From Genesis to Revelation water arcs through the Bible, courses through scripture, shapes the landscapes of many texts, surfaces again and again" And what happened in the Jordan River flows toward us today. Was this the river of liberation, the river where power was given, where lepers were cleansed; all events were signs of God's care.

The servant song of Isaiah calls all to tend the small flame of justice, those waiting on the edge of every coastland. In our reading from Acts Peter sees God's movement in the household of Cornelius, a gentile, He claims that what happened in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is a radical healing and a freedom without restraint, extending beyond human partialities and the limits of acceptability we impose. I love the way this pericope begins...'truly I perceive that God shows no partiality.' What I see as we move to Matthew's gospel is open baptism; we know that crowds had come, all were invited

without restriction. John preached repentance and a turning away from sin, a turning toward God. And we hear the language of sin and death in the formulas of the baptismal liturgy, which we will hear next week as we welcome Felix in baptism.

And perhaps we can notice something else. Jesus comes to this open baptism as one of the righteous. John protests and then falls silent. Jesus responds with the same words with which his mother greeted the archangel, 'let it be...' Maybe Jesus is yielding, handing himself over to a different flow. Maybe it is not so much about a need to be cleansed or born again. Maybe it is about being renewed and revitalized, healed and strengthened, maybe it is about becoming a stream of living water. If we can become more aware of the blessing that flows through everything we touch, the more our touch can bring blessing says one of this week's commentators,

I believe that arthritis man found blessing flowing through him; he showed up with an agenda for others to give. God's intention was for them to receive. What does your baptism mean to you? Is it a way to stay connected or a way to stay separated? Maybe it is about giving not receiving. I'm just thinking it may be so.

Amen+

The Rev. Dr. Linda Privitera

(with thanks to W. P. who shared this story)