

The Baptism of Our Lord
January 10, 2021

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

As most of you know, the liturgical season of Christmas is twelve days long. It begins with Christmas and ends with the Feast of the Epiphany ... the visit of the Three Wise Men. The Feast of the Epiphany is always January 6 ... this past Wednesday ... this past Wednesday with the Feast of the Epiphany against the backdrop of the violent and unthinkable uprising in our nation's capital. Today ... the First Sunday after the Epiphany ... is always a celebration of the Baptism of Our Lord. Considering the events of this week, this is not the sermon I had planned to preach.

The Baptism of Our Lord is one of the special days deemed appropriate for baptisms in our liturgical calendar. (The others are the Eater Vigil, the Day of Pentecost, and All Saints Day.) Normally, I would have replaced our Declaration of Faith with the Baptismal Covenant in the worship service. But today is not normal ... it is not normal for a lot of reasons.

The service of Holy Baptism is full of the Church's highly symbolic language:

“Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?”

“Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?”

“Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?”

However, the liturgy also has some very practical and straightforward questions of all of us who embrace our faith:

“Will you proclaim by word and example the God News of God in Christ?”

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all person, loving your neighbor as yourself?”

“Will you strive for justice and peace among all persons, and respect the dignity of every human being?”

What we witnessed on the Feast of the Epiphany in Washington, DC illuminated hard truths about who we are as a country, and equally, clarified our responsibility as people who take seriously what Jesus took seriously. The word “epiphany” can mean “manifestation.” Jesus was “manifested” to the larger world in the story of the Wise Men from the East who followed the light of a star. What was manifested to us on the Feast of the Epiphany was the stark light of the assault on the Capitol, and its incitement by a variety of elected and appointed leaders, which has led us to see with clarity the disunity in our nation ... the vulnerability of our democracy ... and the essential role of responsible leadership.

The light of the star led the Wise Men to the embodiment of Truth in the child, Jesus. In light of the unconscionable violence and vandalism, we are led to see how fragile is our promise in the Baptismal Covenant to “respect for the dignity of every human being” ... to say nothing of the rule of law. In light of the fatalities of both protesters and police, we are led to see the extreme consequences and destructive power of words. In light of the absence of preparation by law enforcement for an armed, white mob of what police and government agencies have defined as domestic terrorists ... particularly compared to the forces amassed previously for demonstrations about racial justice by predominantly black citizens, to say nothing of the comparative number of arrests ... in light of those events we are led to see the undeniable reality of racism in our society and social structures.

Most importantly, in the light of Christ Jesus, we see our own responsibility not just to speak, but to act ... to confess and repent and hold one another ... every one of us ... accountable to God’s expectations as proclaimed in those promises we make in our Baptismal Covenant.

What happened on Wednesday in Washington was undeniably the act of specific individuals. At the same time, none of us is without some responsibility for the national divisions and divisiveness of this moment. At some level, every one of us is complicit ... by our words, our actions, or the absence thereof. All of us, regardless of political perspective or persuasion, must resist allowing the images of Wednesday’s events ... of rioters and lawmakers alike ... to provide new targets at which to express our self-righteous anger. Rather, those images must challenge us to redouble our efforts in bridging divides and establishing common ground ... to be again a people of hope with a gift of compassionate democracy to model for the world.

During this pandemic with our isolation, masks, social distancing, using Zoom or FaceTime, or Skype to communicate with family members rather than giving them a hug ... during this time we have often talked about the “new normal” that we will be living with when this is all over. Now we have to add to that “new normal” different assumptions about the working of our democracy and civic life.

The word “normal” has its roots in norms ... those norms that a family, or a church, or a society, or a nation choose to live by. When Jesus was born the norms were imposed by an occupying, authoritarian, Roman government. The norms of the Jewish faith had been usurped by imposters in the Temple. Then Jesus was born, and manifested to the world, with “new” norms which were nothing more than the ancient norms of his faith based upon what God had revealed over generations. Jesus embodied these norms to the extent that in him people saw God alive in this world.

The God that was alive in Jesus is also alive in each of us. Those ancient norms are new again. The “new normal” is not so much about whether we will still wear masks and social distance, but whether we will do so for the sake of the common good ... not just our own self-preservation. The “new normal” will be about a government where everyone has a voice and there is justice for all ... legal justice ... economic justice ... racial justice ... environmental justice

... justice for those in this generation, and justice for our children and grandchildren in their generation.

The power of God to bring good out of this horrific time is without question. As has been the case throughout human history, however, it will require not only our full-hearted participation in a “new normal” ... a “normal” with new norms ... but also our surrender to what God desires, and the sacrifice of our own self-interest for the greater common good. Indeed, Jesus taught that common good is our highest self-interest.

It is impossible for a society to incarnate this “new normal” without political implications. We must recognize that our human efforts will always be imperfect, yet not to act is more than just benign neglect, it is passive negligence in which we are culpable. Our efforts ... as imperfect as they may be will always need to be sacrificial, with our generosity forever surpassing what we might receive if they are to be consistent with God’s divine economy. Furthermore, we cannot expect this of our leaders and legislators if we are not willing to practice it ourselves.

This is the Sunday after the Epiphany, the Sunday of the Baptism of Our Lord. This is not the sermon I had planned to preach ... a sermon about John the Baptist and Jesus out in the “wild-ness” instead of the comfort of the Temple. But the events of this week ... with the Feast of the Epiphany as the backdrop ... the invasion of the temple of our democracy by zealots inflamed by false conspiracies ... is its own form of wild-ness. Our Baptismal Covenant reminds us ... sometimes in highly symbolic language, and sometimes in straightforward, practical terms ... what it means to take seriously what Jesus took seriously. This is the “new” norm from our ancient past. It is now our job to reaffirm those ancient “new” norms in our life ... “by word and example.”

From the words of the prophet Micah ... “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly before our God.”

Amen.