

**The Sunday After the Epiphany
The Baptism of Jesus
January 13, 2018**

**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.**

On several occasions I have had people ask me about our church with a curious question, "What denomination is the Cyprian Church?" or "Tell me about the Cypriot Church." Obviously, they did not see the "Episcopal Church" designation in our title, and some assumed that the church was somehow related to the eastern Mediterranean island of Cyprus. Of course, I explained to them that St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church was part of the Episcopal Church in the United States, the Episcopal Diocese of Florida and is related to the Church of England and the worldwide Anglican Communion. I also tell them that our patron ... our namesake, Cyprian ... was a third century bishop in Carthage, North Africa in what is now the country of Tunisia. Cyprian of Carthage ... the man ... was martyred in 258. He was killed by the Romans for not renouncing his Christian faith ... the faith into which he was baptized. A number of traditionally Africa American Episcopal churches ... as well as some African American Roman Catholic churches ... are named after Cyprian because it is assumed that he was a person of color.

The reason I mention this today is that this is the occasion of remembering the baptism of Jesus. It is also one of those times when it is especially appropriate to have a baptism as part of our liturgy, or, if there is no one to baptize, to at least include the Baptismal Covenant as a reminder of the promises we made, or had made for us, at our own baptisms.

But there is something very different about our baptisms today, in a world and culture that accepts and affirms Christianity, as opposed to those early Christians ... like Cyprian ... whose baptism was a life-threatening act of defiance against the Roman government. Until Christianity became a state-sanctioned religion in the 4th century, no convert received the sacrament of baptism lightly ... he or she knew the stakes too well. To align oneself publicly with a scorned and illegal religion was to court persecution, torture, and possibly death.

This is also the First Sunday after the Epiphany. As I mentioned last week word comes from the Greek, and means "startling appearance" or "revealing." During this season between Advent and Christmas ... which is now past ... and Lent ... which is in front of us ... we leave the stories of the manger and swaddling clothes behind, and we turn to stories of revelation ... stories of the Three Kings and a star last week ... stories of doves and voices this week ... of water turned to wine next week ... of the Transfiguration of Jesus on the Sunday before Lent begins.

In my trips to England and Scotland I've been fascinated by the intersection of early Christianity and the native, pagan religion of the area. This gave the Christian Church in the British Isles a unique flavor ... Celtic Christianity. In Celtic Christianity, "epiphany" stories ... these stories of

“startling appearances” and “revelations” are stories of “thin places” ... places where the boundary between the mundane and the eternal ... the sacred ... the holy ... becomes permeable. It is as if God parts the curtain in those thin places, and we catch glimpses of God’s love ... God’s majesty ... and God’s power. So, this season of Epiphany calls us to look beneath and beyond the ordinary surfaces of our world, and discover the extraordinary. And in this season especially, we are called to look deeply at Jesus, and in the process to see God.

Twenty-five years ago this weekend Caren and I were leading a vestry retreat in Adrian, Michigan about 30 miles from Toledo where I was the rector of St. Mark’s Episcopal Church. One of the participants was a colleague and close friend, the Rev. Dennis Walker. Dennis was a Pastoral Associate at St. Mark’s, much like Pastor Deena is here at St. Cyprian’s. Dennis had suffered several bouts of prostate cancer and had gone through surgery and radiation therapy, but the cancer had return ... once again. Dennis knew what was ahead of him, yet he wanted to live as fully as he could for as long as he could ... and he wanted to participate in the Vestry retreat we were leading.

After dinner on Friday evening Dennis wasn’t feeling well so he went to his room. After our evening meeting I went to check on Dennis and found him in excruciating pain. We called his doctor who advised us to take him to Toledo Hospital as fast as we could. Not wanting to bother with the drama of an ambulance, Caren and I drove him to the hospital and met his wife there. We left the hospital about four in the morning, grab a couple of hours of sleep at our home, and then started our journey back to Adrian and the retreat.

The morning was absolutely beautiful ... cloudless, chilly, with fog hanging just below the tops of the stubble of corn left in the farm fields. Then, as the sun began to rise we went around a bend in the road and the field in front of us was sparkling with hoarfrost ... like little snowflakes attached to the corn stubble ... each grabbing the sun’s rays and transforming them into a kaleidoscope of colors. It was breathtaking ... and it was a “thin place.” It was as if God was breaking through our anxiety and worry and distraction and saying everything will be okay with Dennis ... no matter what may happen.

Indeed, it was okay with Dennis. He died two days later. Yet even in his death, he seemed to know something that we could not see ... as if he was experiencing his own “thin place.”

But back to Epiphany and baptism. I’m not sure I can articulate this very well, but I’ll try. The problem I have with the stories in this season is that I’ve never seen a star rising in the East. I have never seen God’s Spirit in any physical form, much less descend like a dove. I’ve never heard a divine voice in the clouds. I’ve never watched water become wine, or seen Jesus’s clothes blaze white on a mountaintop as it is reported in the story of the Transfiguration. Although I profess a belief in a self-revealing God, I have not experienced that divine presence in any of the ways the Epiphany stories describe. As the author of John’s gospel puts it, I’m one of those “people who walk in darkness.”

But I don't think I'm alone in this. I don't know many 21st century Christians who experience signs and wonders, or who complain that God talks too much, or that God butts into their lives too often. But I know plenty of people who experience God as hidden and silent. These are faithful people who long for an epiphany ... they long for some kind of revelation of the holy in their lives.

So I am confronted with a dilemma. Luke's account of the baptism of Jesus. The heavens opened ... a dove descended ... God spoke. Did this really happen, or is this another one of those "Just because it didn't happen doesn't mean it isn't true" kind of stories about God and Jesus.

To accept the supernatural in Scripture is to plunge into a sea of hard questions. If God spoke audibly in the past, why doesn't God do so now? If God does speak to some people, why haven't I heard a divine voice? Even when I think it could be a voice from God I'm sure my therapist would say it was just my unconscious leaking into my conscious realm.

Another possibility, of course, is that these ancient stories of Epiphany are all figurative and metaphorical. Was the dove, in fact, just a dove, and the voice from heaven no more than a nicely timed windstorm or the rumble of distant thunder? When we speak of epiphanies, are we really just talking about metaphors? Perhaps these encounters we have with the sacred in our lives should be described in quotes ... I had a "spiritual experience." I felt "God." God "spoke" to me.

Here's my real problem with this season of Epiphany. I always, always have a choice ... and most of the time, I don't want it. There is a part of me that wants God's revelations to be so obvious that it knocks me down. I want epiphanies to be so obvious that there is no doubt what they are and what they mean. As skeptical as I am, I really would like it to be different. I would really like God to be revealed in such a way that there is no denying it ... although I have to admit that I'd probably still be skeptical.

But no. God has not insulted humanity by making it so crystal clear. We get to choose ... whether we like it or not. No matter how many times and how many ways God shows up, I'm free to ignore the experience. No matter how often God calls me beloved, I can choose to believe otherwise. No matter how many times I remember my baptism ... and the promises of the Baptismal Covenant ... I'm capable of dredging out of the water the very sludge I first threw in. No matter how often I reaffirm my vow to seek and serve Christ in all persons, I'm at liberty to reject others and just walk away.

The stories of this Epiphany season are stories of light, and yet quite often, they end in shadow. The Visitation of the Magi leads to the Slaughter of the Innocents. Jesus's baptism drives him directly into the wilderness of temptation and testing. Soon after he's transfigured, he dies. There is no indication, anywhere in Scripture, that revelation leads to happily-ever-after.

Yet much of the time we speak so lightly ... without any really deep thought ... about faith, revelation, and baptism. As if it's all easy. As if lives aren't on the line. As I mentioned earlier, until Christianity became a state-sanctioned religion in the 4th century, no convert received the sacrament of baptism lightly ... he or she knew the stakes all too well. To align oneself publicly with a scorned and illegal religion was to court persecution, torture, and possibly death.

I don't know about you, but I find so much of this confusing. The voice that might be God might also be wind or thunder ... maybe indigestion ... or maybe just one big delusion. When we go to that altar is the sacrament we receive the very life and body of Jesus? Or is it merely a little cracker and a sip of overly sweet tawny port? Are the words we recite in our Baptismal Covenant actual promises that we live out in our lives ... or just words that sound holy? And with all these sacred symbols around us why is it that those "thin places" where we encounter the divine are so often right in our own neighborhood ... in our backyard ... or on a sand dune overlooking the vast ocean ... or in the eyes of a stranger as we share a meal with them?

What I'm trying to say is that I really don't believe all this is magic. Epiphanies are not passive events that happen to us. Epiphany is about looking for that revelation with new eyes. And if we don't at first see the divine, look again and look harder. Stand in the place that might possibly be a "thin place," and regardless of how jaded or skeptical you feel, cling to the possibility of surprise. Epiphany is deep water ... you can't just dip your toes in ... you must take a breath and plunge.

New Testament scholar and author Marcus Borg died several years ago. In his last book, ***Convictions: How I Learned What Matters Most***, Borg uses his life story to talk about the relevance of faith in today's world. Borg suggests that Jesus himself is one possibility of a "thin place" ... one of those places where the boundary between the mundane of the world and the eternal holiness of the divine is "thin." Borg asserts that when we take seriously what Jesus took seriously, then that barrier between the secular and the sacred is opened ... and we get a glimpse of the divine presence of God.

The other day, as Caren and I were getting ready to walk our dogs, I found a Monarch butterfly lying upside down in a pool of water. I picked up the butterfly's lifeless body with a net, and we went on with our walk. As we passed it on our way back into the house I noticed the butterfly's legs moving. Still upside down it looked like it was clawing the air. I reached down and put my finger down to its legs and the butterfly grabbed hold ... climbed up on my finger slowly moving its wings ... and when it had righted itself it took off. The last I saw of it the butterfly was flying above the tall cedar tree in our backyard. Resurrection? Epiphany? Just an example of nature's resilience? You tell me. But, sometimes those "thin places" are right in our own backyard.

The patron of this church ... Cyprian of Carthage ... lived in a world vastly different from our own. Yet, his commitment to his faith must have given him a glimpse of the sacred and divine presence of God in his life. Cyprian never wrote of miracles in his life, or voices from God, or

seeing God's Holy Spirit looking like a dove. Yet that opening in the "thin place" so he could encounter God was so important in his life that he would rather die, than to give it up.

Following the choir's anthem after this sermon we will continue our liturgy with our Baptismal Covenant from the Book of Common Prayer. As you recite these symbolic words imagine that your life depends on the divine presence of the God that you encounter in those "thin places" in your life. This is the season of Epiphany. Look around you and open your heart and soul to those "thin places." Listen ... we are God's own ... we are God's children ... we are God's pleasure. Even in the deepest water, we are the Beloved.

Amen.