

“Being the Covenant”

Reflections for The First Sunday after Epiphany, Jan. 8th, 2012, by The Rev. Joe Summers.
(Readings Genesis 1:1-5, Psalm 89-20-29 (included at end of the reflection), Acts 19:1-7, Mark 1:4-11)

I want to begin my reflections, today, by contrasting Matthew’s story of the three wise men and the baby Jesus, which is celebrated on the Feast of Epiphany (Epiphany means the revelation of the face of God) with the very different story we hear in Mark’s gospel about the baptism of Jesus. I do this, both to talk a little about how the gospels came to be written as they are written, but also to try to talk about how the Jesus story is meant to help us understand how we are all called by God to let that same magnificent light, that shown over the stable in Bethlehem, shine in us. This is something that can get lost, when all of our attention is on God--out there--in the baby Jesus.

Today we hear that Jesus’s baptism by John was a revelatory event, in which Jesus heard the voice of God saying to him--”you are my beloved son---with you I am well pleased.”

After his death, the early church came to understand and talk about Jesus in light of the scriptures. This too was a kind of revelatory process which the gospels tell us happened, as the risen Jesus led them into understanding how various scriptures spoke about him, his life and his death, and what his followers were to be about.

We can see the process at work in today’s psalm, so I’d encourage you to open it up. It clearly informed the early church in their understanding of Jesus. “I have found David my servant and with my holy oil I have anointed him.” The early church understood Jesus to be the messiah who was anointed by God’s holy oil--that is the Holy Spirit. “No enemy will deceive him.” Gospel story after gospel story portrays Jesus as basically untrappable, as he eludes one plot after another. “The wicked shall not bring him down. I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him.” The church came to see Jesus, not as having his life taken from him, but offering it up for others. Jesus’s foes were not people, but those spiritual powers and principalities that stand against God. “My faithfulness and love shall be with him and he shall be victorious through my name. He will say to me ‘You are my father.’” Jesus called God ‘Abba,’ or daddy, and the experience of the early church was that, in the name of Jesus, they had dominion over the spirits that were enslaving the peoples of the world.

Now the really striking language, “I will make him my first born and higher than the kings of the earth.” How do you make someone your first born? The first born normally referred to the first born son, but in this vision, God chooses to make someone the first born son--that is the inheritor. It’s language similar to language we find in Psalm 2: “God said to me ‘You are my son-- I this day have begotten you.’ “

The way Mark’s gospel draws on the language of this psalm suggests that it is in his baptism that Jesus becomes the Christ, God’s anointed, God’s beloved first born son. It’s a very differ-

ent vision than the vision that we find in Luke and Matthew of Jesus being born the Christ, or John's Gospel of Jesus existing from before all time as Sophia--Holy wisdom. For me, it's a very powerful idea that, not only can we be born again through God's Spirit, but that this was what happened with Jesus; this was how Jesus became God's only begotten Son, God's heir.

Then the psalm says, "I will keep my love for David for ever...and his throne as the days of heaven." For the early church this prophecy about the throne of David could not have referred to the earthly kingship in Israel, for it had been destroyed. For them it spoke of the endless reign of Jesus--now on his throne in the heavens.

While I love the idea of God, fully manifest in the face of a baby child, I think it is also helpful to have this other vision of Jesus as born one of us, and becoming the Christ through being anointed by God's Spirit, God's love, for it can help us understand how God can become manifest in us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Part of this mystery of Epiphany is this mysterious love, breaking through what was perceived to be the hard shell of the heavens, raining down on us. The other part of the mystery is the reciprocal movement that happens, as we in turn respond to that love.

Jesus's response to understanding God's love and affirmation of him is his desire for him to be God's covenant to the world.

It's a vision we find in the prophet Isaiah, who speaks of a mysterious servant of God, through whom God's covenant, God's promise to love and care for the world, will be fulfilled.

We find it in Isaiah 59:21: "this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: my spirit which is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your children, or out of the mouth of your children's children, says the Lord, from this time forth and for evermore."

God promises to bring an end to social inequality and war, so that all can live in peace. All flesh "shall see salvation" and "They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

As heard in Isaiah 42, this will happen through God's servant: "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights (hear the connection to what we hear in Mark's gospel "with you I am well pleased"); I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations....He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth. Thus says God... I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeons, from the prison those who sit in darkness... Behold the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare."

God's servant is God's covenant, the means through which God's will will be done on earth.

At one point Isaiah cries out for deliverance for the people of Israel that are still in exile in Babylon. Instead of sympathy, what he hears back from God is: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the preserved of Israel." No--- "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.... I have kept you and given you as a covenant to the people, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages, saying to the prisoners 'Come forth,' to those who in darkness 'Appear'" (Isaiah 49).

A new heaven and a new earth are coming through God's servant, through whom God will act.

It is such a powerful vision. It reminds me of Karl Marx's saying, "I don't want to be known as a philosopher, because philosophers simply seek to understand the world, but I want to change it".

We still hear many wringing their hands saying "Where is God? Why isn't God more faithful? Why isn't God more effective? Rather than joining the hand wringers, filled with this spirit of heaven, we hear Jesus say: "Here I AM. I will be God's covenant. I will be faithful. I AM is here in me."

Jesus not only says this about himself, he invites his followers to be the covenant. He is seen by the early church as but the first born of a new humanity, a humanity no longer looking for who to blame for injustice and oppression and neglect, but a humanity who steps into the gap to bring the reign of love on earth.

Jesus invites us, too, to know the happiness that comes to us when God's Spirit acts through us.

There is no greater joy, than when God's Spirit acts through us to bless the poor in spirit (the depressed, the lonely, the isolated, those in despair), so that they might know the kingdom of heaven.

There is no greater joy, than when God's Spirit acts through us to comfort those who mourn.

There is no greater joy, than when God's Spirit acts through us to see that the poor people of the earth, the anawim, come to inherit the earth, come to have as much say over how things are run on earth as the powerful and wealthy currently have.

There is no greater joy, than when God's Spirit acts through us to satisfy those who hunger and thirst for justice and right relationship.

There is no greater joy, than when God's Spirit acts through us to show mercy to the merciful.

There is no greater joy, than when God's Spirit acts through us to help the pure in heart experience God.

There is no greater joy, than when God's Spirit acts through us to bring the day when peacemakers are known as children of God--rather than traitors.

The greatest joy comes when the Infinite empowers us to do what love leads us to yearn to do.

The starting point is the star of God's love: the star that shown over the stable in Bethlehem, the star that rose in Jesus's heart in his baptism, the same star that rises in our hearts, giving us the hunger and thirst and anticipation of the day when love shall reign over all.

So let us this day, in this season of Epiphany, this season, in which we celebrate the revelation of the face of God, let God's face shine on us and through us, by letting the day star rise in our hearts, and by letting go of all that would block it's shining in us and over us and through us.

Let us this day respond to the Infinite's yearning to see the day of peace and justice and love come on earth, as it is in heaven, by saying: "Here I Am. Send me! Let me be your covenant to the world."

For if we are willing, God is able, and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.

Psalm 89: 20-29

I have found David my servant;

 With my holy oil have I anointed him.

My hand will hold him fast

 And my arm will make him strong.

No enemy shall deceive him,

 Nor the wicked bring him down.

I will crush his foes before him

 And strike down those who hate him.

My faithfulness and love shall be with him,

 And he shall be victorious through my Name.

I shall make his dominion extend

 From the Great Sea to the River.

He will say to me, "You are my Father,

 My God, and the rock of my salvation."

I will make him my firstborn

 And higher than the kings of the earth.

I will keep my love for David for ever,

And my covenant will stand firm for him.
I will establish his line forever
And his throne as the days of heaven.