

The Generosity of God

January 9, 2010 – The 1st Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 42:1-9 ✕ Psalm 29 ✕ Acts 10:34-43 ✕ Matthew 3:13-17

We thank you, God, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.¹
Amen

With those familiar words from the liturgy for Baptism our hope and desire for reunion with God are brought together. The lessons appointed for today are especially selected to focus our minds, our hearts, and our souls on transforming grace that we encounter in baptism. From the book of the Prophet Isaiah we hear the first of the great 'servant songs'.² For hundreds of years after the Book of Isaiah was put together, our forbearers in the Jewish faith understood the nation of Israel itself to be 'the servant' that was so gracefully and beautifully described in the prophetic writings. As our fathers and mothers of the early Christian faith began to reflect on the life of Jesus of Nazareth and upon the gift of the Hebrew Scriptures, they appropriated those same servant songs as being unique foretellings about Jesus. They saw, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth – in his life, his death, and his resurrection - the 'new thing' about which Isaiah dreamed.

As we joined our voices in the Psalm this morning, we acknowledged a God that sits in

glory, in splendor, and in power. We prayed/sang about a God with all of those strong and significant attributes, and yet – a God that gives peace, and a God that gives blessing.

From the Acts of the Apostles, the Lectionary gives us one of Peter's great sermons. Peter has been called to the home of Cornelius, a pagan Roman – and on top of that, a Centurion. A member of the occupying army that was complicit in the execution of Jesus. In that household, the message of peace from God is attributed to the ministry of Jesus.

And finally in the gospel, Matthew has given us his account of the Baptism of Jesus.

The prayer of Thanksgiving over the Water of Baptism is among the most beautifully crafted in the Book of Common Prayer. It begins: *We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.*

In baptism we encounter the same God who uttered a word and created the heavens and the earth. In baptism we encounter the same God who heard the cry of a nation of slaves and brought them out of bondage and into freedom. And in baptism we encounter that

same God who has heard our own cry, and who will lead us into everlasting life.

As this year progresses, and we continue to hear the stories of the life and ministry of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, we'll see how it was that Jesus came to be so easily identified as 'the servant' from the hopes and dreams found in Isaiah. The life and ministry of Jesus will unfold before us along a much different track and plan than was hoped and dreamed of by his cousin John the Baptizer. John was still trapped in the old paradigm of a Messiah who would appear with fire and wrath, with a winnowing fork in his hand, full of a type of power and splendor that would be manifest in vengeance against sin, and against the enemies of Israel.

Well, that's not exactly the type of Messiah that showed up on the bank of the River Jordan. This Messiah will not cry, or lift up his voice. This Messiah will not break a bruised reed, or quench a burning wick. This Messiah will bring forth justice. This is the Messiah in whom new things are declared.

It is into new life, a life transformed into that of a servant, that our own baptism calls us. It is not an accident of the calendar that the church has appointed the First Sunday after the Epiphany as a day appropriate to celebrate the liturgy of baptism. Epiphany is the season when we are called to be especially mindful of God being made manifest in the person of Jesus. Jesus, who is a light to the nations, one who opens the eyes of the blind – one who brings each of us out of the dark dungeons of our lives.

It seems to some of us that America is in a dark dungeon right now. Diana Butler Bass, a commentator on the state of the church in America who some of you have read, tells the story of her husband's family going to their

local church on the Sunday following the assassination of The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. – looking and hoping for the pastor to make some sense of the tragedy. They got instead – nothing. No mention of the shock that the country was undergoing, no comment – nothing.

Yesterday's attempted assassination of U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords, which has left, so far, six people dead, and another dozen injured, including Mrs. Giffords, has brought many to shock and dismay. I have already heard and read of some who are blaming the Tea Party movement's violent rhetoric and "Second Amendment solutions." Gifford's Tea Party opponent in the last election provided contributors the opportunity to take target practice with an M-16 automatic rifle, as they raised money to "take out" Gifford. Sarah Palin had a map of the United States with selected elections pinpointed: not with stick pins, or small flags, but with a symbol that is easily recognizable as being the 'cross-hairs' of a rifle target.

Some on the so-called "Right" will quite simply and easily write this tragedy off as the deranged action of an irresponsible individual. Those on the so-called "Left" or "Progressive" end of the spectrum will call for increased gun control.

If you read the on-line comments of the Poughkeepsie Journal website – and I suggest you do so only if you have your blood pressure medicine nearby - then you know that some are convinced, that if only "more" individuals carried loaded guns, we would have less violence in our society. Like many of you, I have a difficult time making sense out of any of this.

In the liturgy for baptism we promise to

respect the dignity of every human being. Our society in America today is so very, very far from a place that gives dignity to every human being. We exist in a culture that has been overtaken with a mindset of fear, of cruel & hateful & sarcastic public discourse by politicians and commentators on radio, TV, and in the press. None of us should be surprised that we have an epidemic of bullying among our adolescents, and young people in high school and college. It is the primary lesson they would learn – if they surf the web, listen to the radio, watch television, and perhaps, if they listen to the adults in their own lives, around the dinner table at home.

Too much of American Christianity is in a God-awful mess. Between the development of the cult of personality that has developed around a growing number of high-profile TV-based preachers; the insidiousness of the so-called 'Prosperity Gospel'; and the head-stuck-in-the-sand of so many in the church who choose to simply retreat from the events of our society and culture: the Gospel of love and compassion and justice as taught by Jesus has been too often, been left far behind.

As followers of Jesus Christ, today's lessons for the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus are precisely in context for our time.

It is time for the new things that God declared to Isaiah.

In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the old way of doing things went down under the waters of the River Jordan, and transformation rose up.

Transformation – rose - up.

That is the gift behind the symbol of the font, beyond the wetness of the water. Baptism tells

us that each person is beloved of God. Baptism tells us that every human being is the child of God. Baptism is the gift that contains within it the generosity of God.

“The challenge, for those of us who are baptized, is to live into the gift of our own transformation.”³

¹ From the Prayer of Thanksgiving offered over the water, during the liturgy for Baptism, Book of Common Prayer, page 303.

² Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12.

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