

Signed and Sealed

Based upon Mark 1:4-11 and Genesis 1:1-5

January 8, 2006 by Rev. Mark Seifried

First Sunday After Epiphany – Townsend Congregational Church, UCC

PRAYER: MAY THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH . . .

The Gospels assert that Jesus, the Jew who grew up in rural Galilee, was none other than God's own Son, dispatched from heaven to lead the fight against evil. With that mission in mind, it leads us to question Jesus' priorities. At the top of that list are natural disasters. Surely one who could cure illness and raise the dead could also fix a few of the bigger problems like tsunamis, earthquakes and hurricanes. How about plagues like AIDS, cancer, and famine?

It seems to me that God wasn't much interested in those sorts of things. Maybe philosophers and theologians are right when they speculate that some conditions exist as consequences of human freedom. That brings to mind a question I have, "Do we have too much freedom?" We have the freedom to harm and kill each other, to fight global wars, to desecrate our planet. We are even free to defy God and live without restraint. I wish that Jesus had devised some plan to tip the scale in God's favor. God seems so easy to ignore or defy. More than that, it is so easy for us to become self-righteous.

Novelist and Christian writer, Kathleen Norris elucidates, "One of the strangest things that people say is, 'I'm a good person.' One wonders how they know that about themselves. It seems more appropriate to say, 'I attempt to be a good person.'" There is a passage in the Book of Titus that says "To the pure, everything is pure." One of the Early Christian Elders, Abba Poemen, said, "If a man has attained that to which the Apostle speaks of, 'to the pure, everything is pure,' he sees himself less than all creatures." Another brother asked, "How can I deem myself less than a murderer?" Abba Poemen answered, "When one has really comprehended this saying, if he [has knowledge that someone has murdered] he says, 'He has only committed this one sin, but I commit sins every day.'"

History has demonstrated that if enough people begin to define themselves as “good” in contrast to others who are “bad,” those others come to be seen as less human. Cruelty to others can be seen as deserved. Even genocide is justified in the eyes of those who perpetrate it on the grounds that it is sub-humans who are being killed. They think something evil is being eliminated from the world by those who are good.

One of the most challenging things about Jesus is the way in which he pulls the mask off the self-righteous, equating the thoughts of our hearts with actual crimes. Jesus makes anger, insult and belittling equivalent to murder, and lust to adultery. If we are willing to be honest, we can see the mixture of good and evil within ourselves. We can understand crimes of passion. We can at least empathize with other sinners and admit our own vulnerability to transgression.

And so today, we remember the baptism of Jesus. Before he began his public ministry, he was baptized the same as you and me. He humbled himself, knowing that all he would accomplish would be out of God’s grace, symbolized in the living water of baptism.

Jesus came into the world to show us the way of God with abundant grace, mercy, compassion and forgiveness. Jesus came not to stop storms or earthquakes, but to teach us about the human soul that concerns God. He came to demonstrate what it means to really be humble. He knew temptation. He faced it head on. From biblical accounts, he too, was subject to fatigue. When he got tired he got cranky. He called people on the carpet and even had fits of rage himself. He never called himself perfect. Rather he demonstrated humility as a way for us to become more holy. He said if you want to be holy like God, you have to humble yourself and consider yourself equal to or lower than every other creature on this earth. You are here on earth not to be served, but to be a servant. If you want to be loved, you have to work hard at loving. If you want to know God, you have to give up your ego and forget about yourself. If you really want to know who you are, you have to know who made you. You are not a self-made man or woman. Everything you have, everything you’ve become is a result of someone or something else’s sacrifice.

A book called *Tales of Adam* that I recently read puts this lesson in simple terms. Adam tells his son Abel that the first gift of wisdom is the gift of seeing beneath the surface of things and calling them by their true

names. Adam says, "The child looks at you, at me, at your mother and calls us men and women. But the child sees only our appearance for we are not men and women, we are deer. The flesh that grows upon our bones is the flesh of deer we have eaten. The eyes that move in our heads are the eyes of deer, and we look at the world in their stead and see what they must have seen. The fire of life that once burned in the deer now burns in us, and we live their lives and walk in their tracks across the hand of god."

Adam goes on to say, "All together, we are the life of this place, indistinguishable from one another, intermingling in the flow of fire, and the fire is god. To each is given its moment in the blaze, its spark to be surrendered to another when it is sent, so that the blaze may go on. None may deny its spark to the general blaze and live forever. Each is sent to another someday. You are sent; you are on your way." Although the author was referring as much to the web of life and the food chain, the same is true of the spirit world. We are not alone. We live on the mercy and by the grace of God.

It was into that grace that Jesus was baptized, knowing that without God he was nothing. Jesus modeled for us and called us to humility, to know that we are completely dependent on God and one another. As we reflect on Jesus' baptism, we might follow Martin Luther's advice, in his larger catechism, to consider and recall our own baptism as well. Luther did not support repeating baptism but called on us to make repeated use of our baptism. He said, "A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued." Whether we have been baptized or not, remember it or not, we have opportunity today to claim and rejoice in the very real ways in which God comes to light in the church and in our lives. Through baptism, God declares that because we have the fire of life, we are beloved children of God. God is well pleased when we share the spiritual light of that fire with others.

Most of us were baptized as children. Our parents and godparents made promises for us. The church into which we were baptized made promises to love and nurture us in the faith. Today, I invite you to accept, to remember your baptism and to be thankful. It is a time to renew the baptismal covenant, knowing that we are in constant need of God's grace to both receive and share the spark of life that comes from God.

Titus 1:15

Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace* (New York, Riverhead Books, 1998)
pg. 176.

Remembering him kicking over the money changers table and driving
them from the Temple.

Daniel Quinn, *Tales of Adam* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2005) pg.
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