

Sunday, January 13, 2019

Isaiah 43:1-7 Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17. 21-22

Building the Community

In this season of Epiphany we will focus on the person Jesus and learn a little bit more about who he is as a human being but also as the Son of God. Last week our focus was on the magi/ or wise men who went to the house where Jesus, Mary and Joseph were and after their long journey these people offered to the child, gifts which indicated his power, but also his place in what would become history.

We fast forward about 30 years in Jesus' life and we are reminded what is happening in the world in which Jesus is living. Pontius Pilate is governor of Judea, Annas and Caiaphas are the high priests and the Tiberius Caesar is reigning in Rome. During this time- John the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth receives the word of God while in the desert. John is preaching a new message of repentance and the need for people to be baptized in water for the forgiveness of sins. A part of his message is what Isaiah wrote hundreds of years before. We read this prophecy as part of our preparations during advent;-- A voice of one calling in the desert—prepare the way for the Lord and now John is telling the crowds it's happening sooner than you think! Get ready!

John is warning them to get baptized and repent. The ax is already at the root of the trees and ever tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. John is also preaching a message of welcoming others- sharing what one has with one who has nothing- whether it is food or clothing, or money. They are to give and share as people ready to receive the messiah!

Some people were amazed at John's teaching- and thought he was the messiah but he tells them that he only uses water to baptize. But the messiah will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John preached the good news of the messiah and people listened, and responded. They were baptized. On one such day, Jesus and some of his friends were wandering around the area and found John at the Jordan River. Jesus was baptized too. And it is in this special event in Jesus' life where his presence is especially manifested with power. This is one of those epiphany moments!

In Luke's gospel we heard that the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." In newer translations, which are thought to be more accurate, the adjective "beloved" is made a separate phrase to emphasize the intensity of the person. That is why Luke is different than the other three gospels.

The other writers imply that the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism, apparently when he was still in the water. That is the way this scene is often portrayed in religious art, especially those beautiful paintings out of the Middle Ages. Jesus, standing waist deep in water. John the Baptist standing next to him, pointing at Jesus, as if to say, "This is the one!" or, in the words of the Gospel of John, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!" Above Jesus' head in these scenes is the Spirit, as a dove, descending.

That's the way all the other gospels picture it. But Luke is different. He says, "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the Holy Spirit descended upon him." So when did God come to Jesus- in the public celebration in the middle of the river with people watching and with John present, or when Jesus was alone? When did this epiphany occur? Was it a big movie production type scene: "This is Jesus my Son" or was it a personal and private experience? Luke emphasizes the fact that Jesus was praying- was he in the water; alone in a room by himself, or were there many witnesses. In either, interpretation and presentation of Jesus' baptism, God is present and this marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry as he moves from the carpenter to the preacher, teacher and healer. But no matter which story is heard, the baptism of Jesus is to be seen as a spiritual experience.

And this is what occurs when we are baptized and others are welcomed into God's family. Through God's Spirit, individuals or the parents of children are called by name, the name given to them by their parents and something urges them to come forward to feel the waters of baptism. When the water is poured the Spirit is present and they are recognized as God's children and welcomed into God's family. Anyone watching—feels the Spirit too!- Sometimes there are emotional responses—tears. Laughter and even uncontrolled movement. But overall it is an experience made possible through God's presence. And there is a sense of welcome/ belonging/ and even contentment which is not like something else before!

Maybe you remember your baptism or at least you remember the welcome you received or you were told about your baptism and the story of what occurred—you screamed with the water, or you helped play in the water, or if an older child or adult- you closed your eyes and you felt something but it was inexplicable== no words could express it. But in that moment—it was you and God together! What a welcome—God called you by name and you were received.

Has anything ever compared to this? Maybe you changed schools when you were growing up; or you moved at different times; or you moved from one neighbourhood to another. Or maybe you began to work at one place and was welcomed for your gifts and talents right away. Or even pushing this further—moving from one area of Canada or the world to here and you were welcomed even though it was difficult at first.

Our Epiphany resource “Light of the Star” was written and produced by Kairos the Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives whose focus is to raise awareness of the needs of people. Their focus for this week is on how we welcome others into our midst- not only in our times to worship, but in our communities and does it make a difference in our welcome when people are coming to work for a short time or to stay permanently. How do we invest ourselves in others and is it because we have to or because we feel the need to share love and compassion for others.

Jesus was recognized for who he was- the beloved Son of God. Others heard the voice of God say listen to him. He was welcomed and if we read further in Luke’s gospel we soon learn that Herod did not like hearing about John’s gatherings and had him arrested and imprisoned. Yet Jesus was just beginning his life’s purpose and his ministry. As we continue to learn about Jesus’ character and ministry we too might need to renew our faith and listen for the Spirit to touch our hearts. This might mean stopping our routine and praying for we need to remember whose we are—people who have been touched by the waters of baptism and favoured as God’s people. We might even need to experience our own quiet revival just because of what has occurred in our lives throughout each day.

Oprah Winfrey was once asked in a Newsweek magazine interview, "How do you separate yourself from work?" Answer, "I take a hot bath. . . My bath is my sanctuary. It's the place where I can wash off all the stuff of the day" ((Jan 8, 2001, p. 45). Maybe there is something in water for each of us- after all Jesus was baptized; prayed and was introduced as God’s Son.

Baptism is a huge symbol as it is the water of creation in which we are born anew. It is when we might renew our life in the Spirit and with it all the "stuff" of the day is washed off. All of that is true. But at its basic level, baptism is the death of the old self. Before anything new can be born, the old has to pass away and we are welcomed in the community and family of God. This is how we build up our faith and build up our community. For we are all welcomed into God’s family as brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, the one whom God called, Beloved Son Let us rejoice in this as we experience the waters of baptism and renew our faith.