

Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Killeen, Texas

January 13, 2019

Amazingly for Jesus, as for us, Baptism, not birth, appears to be the beginning of real life for all of us. On this day when we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, we are compelled to recognize that, at the Jordan River, Baptism immerses Jesus, too, in the power of God. Like Jesus, we soak up God in our Baptism. We begin a journey toward becoming all that God created us to be.

If Baptism opens our floodgates to God, we need to know all we can about what we're letting in. We need to look beyond our assumptions – all the quick and easy "God words" we've learned, like "almighty," "omnipotent," "all-seeing." Many of these concepts are theological wishful thinking. They grow from our human desire for power rather than any real knowledge of God. We picture God as all that we wish *we* were. Jesus would never have fallen for that.

Jesus know that the direct evidence from scripture is shockingly different from our conventional ideas about God. Speaking through Isaiah about Israel's future Messiah, God says, "Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him." We are meant to understand that this servant, Jesus, will be God's alter ego in the world, with God's own spirit upon him, functioning as God would function. Christians even call him the *son* of God.

But what will this visible God be? Almighty? Omnipotent? Scarcely. In God's own words: "A bruised reed, a dimly burning wick."

Come again?

We're not talking about a John Wayne God. Sounds more like Jimmy Stewart. Bends but doesn't break...flickers but doesn't go out. Big deal!

The problem is not only that dim and limp objects don't impress us. The deeper problem is that their very weakness immediately makes us think about the forces that act on them. We're less likely to think about the blade of grass than the heel that steps on it – less the guttering wick than the gale force winds blowing it.

Our minds go instinctively not to God's power, but to the power of the world. We start thinking about how overwhelming the power of evil is. We are dismayed at how little the forces of good ever seem to accomplish in the world. We wonder where that omnipotent God might have gone.

So, in our first pass through Isaiah, we learn that we're more easily impressed by earthly strength than by the power of God. And we are, aren't we? Any time we ourselves feel like a bent reed or a flickering flame our whole system goes on alert for heels and wind. We experience a gnawing fear that we might not be able to survive. Get an audit notice from the IRS and your spirit is instantly darkened by the powers that are acting against you. The God of Sunday morning isn't on your radar screen, except for a few quick desperation prayers.

Nor, truth to tell, do we find God any more often in the successes we achieve against these forces. As we think of heels and wind, we try to imagine ourselves not as

oil lamps and reeds, but as blowtorches and oak trees. We boost our courage by inflating our self-image and reassuring ourselves with an old John Wayne dvd or two.

Almost without noticing, we come to measure our success in life by our image of what we *wish* we were. We wish we could go toe to toe with the IRS, or face down the critic from hell. We dream about the great and brilliant things we wish we had said. We wish we could solve poverty or bring world peace. But since we can't, and we're allowed to achieve so little, we end up seeing ourselves as *less* than we think we should be (less – and this is the real tragedy – than we actually are!)

Baptism is what we need. We need to get serious about living the real life that Baptism began and put behind that phony life based on fear and wish. Like Jesus, today, we need to open the floodgates and let the real God pour into our lives.

So, we need to study bent reeds and flickering flames with more attentive eyes. How are these things images of the real God, and how are they images for the life God intends to pour into us? What is their power?

Reeds and wicks are strong because their vitality comes from inside, not outside. With their strength measured by their ability to persist in the face of heel and wind, they must be incredibly strong or such powers would have swept them away long ago.

The fibers that give the reed its tenacity and the oil that feeds the wick are really very powerful. These things aren't hollow. There's a lot inside of them.

Baptism's immersion in God relocates our idea of power. We stop taking powers outside of ourselves so seriously. We begin to give the power within credibility. Rather than obsessing about what we're up against and how much we wish we were more than we are, Baptism makes us aware of our fibers and our oil. Baptism makes us conscious of how strong we must be to be here at all.

When this world gets its way, none of us spares energy for love, hope, trust, belief, yearning, or even *life* in any spiritual sense. The wind and the heels would have kicked those things out of us long ago. If you stop and think, it's really just amazing that we are still able to do such spiritually delicate, sensitive and vulnerable things.

That's why we love Frodo Baggins. He's just a half-size human, but he is *extremely* persistent. He bends but doesn't break. He triumphs the way you and I have to triumph – by putting one foot in front of the other.

Frodo had a mission. Baptism into God's inner life gives us a mission.

"I have put my spirit upon him," God says. "He will bring forth justice."

Justice is our mission. And what is justice? Justice is the right of each and every little thing to be just what it is. And wonder of wonders, that is exactly the way we have defined the power of God in us. Justice is the right of each blade of grass to keep standing, and each guttering lamp to keep burning. Justice honors life from within, the gift of God in the form of our very being, the image of God engraved on our soul.

If we are a bent reed or a flickering flame, we are already living God's justice just by standing or burning. As we live our baptism and keep alive hope, love, good faith, trust – the juices of life itself – we serve justice with all the mighty life within us.

Is that all God expects of us? Shouldn't we conquer something in his name? Shouldn't we storm the Holy Lands and reclaim the sacred sites from the Infidels?

Naaah.

Conquest is playing the world's game on the world's terms, and the first casualty of conquest is always God. Wherever there are Crusades and Inquisitions, God is far away.

Think instead of Rosa Parks, who simply was herself, taking her small, insignificant place in the world. It just happened that her place was at the front of the bus in Birmingham, Alabama in 1955.

A dimly burning wick, she would not be put out. A bruised reed, she would not break. A simple African-American lady, she would not be put off the bus. Occupying her just place drew the world's venom and turned the world toward justice.

Rosa Parks' real quest wasn't to do a superhuman thing. She wasn't more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings with a single bound.

Her job was to go be herself and take her place, *and not lose her soul in the face of gale-force retaliation*. That's not superhuman. It's what we all should do.

And it's something we all *can* do, if we can just stop letting our agendas be set by the evil around us. We must trust the life of God within us, trust that evil cannot break us or put out our light, even if we are killed, as Martin Luther King or Jesus.

If you are yourself and cherish that same justice for those around you near and far, you will have done all that God put you here to do.

God's kingdom will not come because armies of Christian warriors have massacred the armies of darkness. God's kingdom will come because we have all decided, one by one, that it's good enough just to be good and just.

That's something very grand in its simplicity. It's grand enough for the skies to open over your head. It's grand enough for that voice from heaven to say, "This is my child in whom I am well pleased."

The Rev. David Hoster