

“The True Nature of Light” – Tim Hall

Sunday January 7, 2018 – 1 Epiphany, Year B

(Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11)

This morning, on the First Sunday after the Epiphany, we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord. The festival day of Epiphany, otherwise known as the 12th day of Christmas, was yesterday and is traditionally seen as the day the wise men from the east arrived in Bethlehem, found the holy family, and presented their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Jesus, the new born savior. These magi were not Jews, they came from afar, but they knew that something radical was underway. Something that would change the world. We might even say that these Gentiles were the first converts to Christianity.

Epiphany is the season of Light. A time when we try even harder to let our Christian light shine throughout the world. Last week’s reading from the first verses of the Gospel of John provided a prelude to this season: *“What was coming into being in him was life, and the life that was the light to all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”*

Last Sunday Josette preached on our Gospel and Epiphany calling. She told the story about how one little act of kindness, which was actually a huge sacrifice on the part of the homeless man that had reached out to help: how this act of unconditional giving completely changed this man’s life. And not his life alone, but those of the folks he helped that returned his kindness, and those of the people in the schools he helped with his new GoFundMe account, and the lives that they would touch. You see, giving and kindness can be contagious!

Last weekend Judy and I were in NH, where we attended the 3rd Congregational Church of Alstead on Sunday morning. There the Gospel reading was the story of the baby Jesus’ presentation at the temple. We have a day in our Episcopal church calendar set aside for this... February 2nd. But in Alstead they were continuing the Christmas narrative chronologically.

Since this holy day falls on a Friday this year, we’ll miss the opportunity to hear this story. So I’d like to share it with you now, especially since it fits in so well with our baptismal theme this morning. From the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, starting at verse 22:

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, the parents of Jesus brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord").

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents

brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

*"Lord, you now have set your servant free,
to go in peace as you have promised;
For these eyes of mine have seen your Savior,
whom you have prepared for all the world to see:
A light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for the glory of your people Israel."*

The word of the Lord.

The presentation was like a baptism... dedicating the child to God. The infant has no say in this. But it is the parents that are saying "you are my beloved son or daughter: in you we are well pleased. Now grow in the knowledge and love of God."

I love this "Song of Simeon" also known as the "Nunc Dimittis". In three short phrases it sums up our Christian calling and our Christian reward. Pastor Maureen's homily focused on Simeon and the prophet Anna's faith and patience. They knew that God always fulfills his promises. We just need to have faith in that and the patience to see that God's works and God's plans are done in God's time.

God promised Zechariah and Elizabeth that even in their old age they would bear a child, who would become the prophet of the Most High. And in today's Gospel from Mark we see that promise fulfilled as Jesus comes to be anointed by John.

John's "baptism of repentance" is very different from infant baptism. It is a conscious decision to live life in a new direction. The Greek word that has been translated as "repentance" is *metanoia*, meaning "a change of heart" or "changing one's mind". And behind that is the Hebrew word *shub*, meaning "turn back". So John's baptism is about redirecting one's life. John demands that his followers lead their lives on a new basis because the last word in the universe has to do not with power, possession, wisdom, success, or any of the other values the world exalts, but with God's mercy.

And stepping into this is Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, who probably labored daily in the new and burgeoning Roman city of Tiberias, a half day walk from his home. Jesus, who has come to be baptized a second time not only to change his direction in life, but to provide a change of heart for humanity, a totally new direction based on faith and love and charity and acceptance. And God says, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Isn't this what we all want to hear? From our parents? From our God? Sadly, many children and teens never receive words of encouragement from their parents or caregivers. They only know what it feels like to be reminded of their failures or ridiculed for their shortcomings. And

many adults never feel these words of encouragement and love in their spiritual life, either because they have fallen away or they have never been invited.

In our reading from Acts this morning, Paul is visiting new disciples in Ephesus where he learns that they have only been baptized into John's baptism. They have accepted the challenge of living life in a new way, but they have never even heard of the Holy Spirit! Can you even imagine that? Paul tells them they must be baptized in the name of Jesus, and on doing so the Holy Spirit came upon them. And everything changed.

And so now it's up to us, as those who have been baptized in the name of Lord Jesus, to act as Jesus' hands and feet and heart to the world. To let our light shine, no, to let Jesus' light shine through us, not only in this season of Epiphany, but throughout the year and throughout our entire lives; having faith that every good deed we do, and every sacrifice we make, and every transgression we forgive or for which we seek forgiveness, will bear abundant fruit in the glorious Kingdom of God.

“In the beginning the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.”

Amen