

First Sunday after Epiphany

January 13, 2008

Lessons: Psalm 24; Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, THE SON AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

Today in the Gospel of Matthew we heard the familiar account of John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River. And we heard again those familiar words:

“And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’”

And do you remember what happened next? After a period of testing, Jesus began his public ministry. He began to do those things that he had been born to do. Jesus began to touch the lives of those around him. So how might this apply to us? Let me ask you a question.

Do you remember the words that were said when a Bishop or Priest placed a hand on **your** head on the day **you** were baptized? After saying your name out loud, these or very similar words were spoken”

“...you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own for ever. Amen.”

What do you suppose those words might mean? What have those words meant for your life so far? And what do you think those words might mean for each our lives...tomorrow...and each and every day as we go forward?

To help us gain some perspective, listen to these words by Professor William Barclay:

“For thirty years Jesus had waited in Nazareth, faithfully performing the simple duties of the home and of the carpenter’s shop. All the time he knew that a world was waiting for him. All the time he grew increasingly conscious of his waiting task...Jesus must have waited for the hour to strike, for the moment to come, for the summons to sound. And when John emerged Jesus knew that the time had arrived.”

Jesus waited and prepared for thirty years. And then he acted. There is almost a sense of anticipation, a sense of urgency in Professor Barclay’s words. But again you might ask, how does this apply to us? How do these words apply to those of us here this morning, those of us who continue to ask “Lord, make us instruments of Peace.” Do we have a sense of anticipation? Do we feel a sense of urgency on this First Sunday after Epiphany?

Last week, in the sermon that he prepared for The Epiphany, Fr. Bob reminded us that:

"...on (Epiphany)... and during this liturgical season, ...it is our ministry, our life, to show or to exhibit Jesus as Savior to the World... This is the season in which we focus on taking the good news of Jesus Christ to the World. This is the season in which we focus on others... Epiphany-our season of showing Christ to the World."

In "Living The Message", Eugene Peterson commented that wherever he goes, he has been anticipated, that Jesus has preceded him. Peterson's role is to see what Jesus is doing and to enter into it. As we have gone out each day to be "Instruments of Peace" we have tried to apply this concept. The challenge is to remember to look around and be sensitive to what we see. Two weeks ago I read something that I think can be very helpful to us. Something that can increase our sensitivity to the world around us.

Listen very carefully to these words of Steve Chapman. And as you listen, put yourself and your emotions into the scenes. Try to really see the colors and hear the sounds. Chapman wrote:

"Sadness washed over me when I saw it sitting in our neighbor's backyard. The old fishing boat had been there when we first moved in the summer of 1988, and it was still in the same spot when we moved away in 1996. I'm not sure how long it sat in the yard before we arrived, but the sight of it tore at me each time I took it in.

The craft was an olive-green aluminum boat. As a result of its long stay in the shadows of the trees, it was covered with sap and mildew. The many spring seasons had brought new crops of leaves and many autumns dumped them into the unused boat. The flat tires of the trailer were buried in the dirt, and grass had overtaken the axles. What a pitiful scene it was.

We were unable to get to know the owners of the boat. We knew their names and a few other items about them, but that was about it. As far as their relationship with their lonely boat was concerned, I assumed it was a "toy" the family had enjoyed for a while. I couldn't be sure. But one thing was for certain, there was a day when they brought it home from the marine dealer and proudly parked it in their yard. They probably even peeked through the window blinds that evening and dreamed of the fun it represented.

I also suspect there was good care given at first to the old boat. A cleaning cloth probably slid faithfully across its hull after it was re-trailerred and brought back home from the lake. The carpet was likely vacuumed. The drain plug was pulled so it would empty of residual water. The required maintenance was done to keep the small outboard motor in good running order. The prized possession was likely treated as one of the family until one day something began to change. Perhaps the kids grew up and their interest in going fishing waned. As a result, the boat sat longer and longer between trips to the water. Maybe the dad got too busy maintaining a living. At some unknown point in time there was a lifelessness about the boat out back that became unnoticed."

Chapman continued:

Admitting there is still enough “little kid” left in me to humanize inanimate things, I imagined the old fishing boat might have had something to say about its sad state. Feeling quite lonely, it may have wakened and spoke each time it heard our neighbor’s lawn mower start up. ‘Ah ha! They’re mowing the yard today. Maybe they’ll see me and pull me out of this mud hole to take me to the lake. There I’ll see friends I haven’t seen for so long. And, oh, how I long to feel the water flowing across my belly again. Perhaps today!’ But it wasn’t to be. Day after day, summer after summer, year after year the time passed until the old boat was completely forgotten. Ignored by its family, it lowered its bow one evening and died.

When I came along, what I saw was not just an old, dilapidated, aluminum boat. It was a haunting reminder of some folks I’ve seen in my day. At one time they were valued and felt a usefulness that kept them energized and shipshape. Then somewhere along the path of time, they were forgotten. Others around them got distracted by life. Eventually they were left only with hope that people would come along, find them worthy of their attention, and give them a home where they would be loved and appreciated.” Chapman concluded:

Most of us do not have to look very far to find an ‘old vessel’ whose spirit is barely alive. They are around us, some right in our own homes. Perhaps it’s time to go to them and see if they can be encouraged.”

At our baptism each of us has had our name called out loud. We have each been told: “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own for ever.” Let’s each remember our baptism and the words that were said to us as we listen again to Fr. Bob’s concluding words from last week:

“Let each of us in our hearts, today, respond to the call of Jesus and receive the light of Christ so that He may lighten our ways and strengthen us in order that we may light the ways and lives of those around us.

Oh God, prepare us and strengthen us for this Epiphany ministry of going into all the world to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

AMEN