

January 13, 2019

Luke 3:15-17,21-22

Today is the first Sunday after Epiphany. Last Sunday, January 6th, was Epiphany; the twelfth day of Christmas; the day tradition says the Magi – Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar – arrived at the stable, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These gifts represent royalty, divinity, and death; a foreknowledge, if you will, of who the baby Jesus is and what his fate will be.

Epiphany comes from a Greek word for manifestation or appearance. For many Christians, Epiphany refers to “the manifestation of the divine nature of Jesus.” In a modern, non-religious context when we hear the word epiphany we think of “an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure,” as in “a lightbulb just went off in my head. So, now I understand.”

The sixth of January is not only Epiphany, it is the beginning of the Epiphany season. In this season the given Gospel lesson each Sunday focus on those events in Jesus’ life where his “divinity” is revealed, made manifest. On the first Sunday after Epiphany the Gospel text always refers to Jesus’ baptism, which is where we are at today.

I share all this information with you, because it is good to know about our faith traditions; traditions that grew over time and were intended to help us better understand our faith. It is also important for you to wonder, contemplate these stories and their traditions, because – to be honest – surely, given our understanding of history and fact, you have to at least wonder how we know the names of the Magi, for instance.

I will leave the answer to that question to another time. My point here is, often the stories and traditions of our faith

do not always seem to align with what we understand as “fact”. My general response to this is that the stories of the Bible and the traditions of our faith are true about the human condition. They may not be historical in the sense we speak of historical record today, but they are none the less true.

Today’s scripture lesson is a primary example of what I am trying to express. We are told, the sky opened up and a being, in the form of a dove, descended and a voice spoke, “You are my child, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.” The question for us is not whether it is factual or not, but whether or not it is true; a question for each one of us to decide. It is a faith question.

Is Jesus chosen and marked by God’s love? If you say no, then you are free of all the other faith stories. No more struggles with Bible passages, difficult or not. Jesus is no longer important. But, if you say yes, then the faith journey really begins, because then you have to ask yourself: If it is true, what does Jesus and his baptism mean for me?

In this part of today’s reading Luke is telling us that Jesus, born into poverty, lowest of the lowly, is loved by God; is, in fact, “chosen and marked by” God’s love, the pride of God. And further, we are to understand, from the stories we learn about and from Jesus later, that God’s love is for all creation and can be experienced, when we, like Jesus, go down to the river, seeking to turn our lives around, washing ourselves in the waters of baptism.

Being told we are loved and lovable, despite the many things we have done that we are ashamed of, is a powerful message in itself, but our reading offers us more. Before Jesus arrives at the river John tells us what we are to expect, when we seek to be baptized, not by John, but by the One who is to come, “the main character in this drama”. The One

who is to come “will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within [us], changing [us] from the inside out.”

Two things caught my eye, when I read this verse. First, “the kingdom life, the Holy Spirit” is within me; the seed is already there, waiting to be watered and nurtured, to be “ignited”.

The second thing that jumped out at me was the phrase “will ignite the kingdom life”. “Kingdom life” is code, if you will, for living by the teachings of Jesus; teachings that those who believe Jesus is “chosen and marked by [God’s] love” are God-given teachings for how to live into and up to all God intended us to be; into our full humanity.

Within us already is the seed for the kingdom life. It is as we allow ourselves to be baptized by Jesus, watered by Jesus that we begin to grow into the kingdom life, into the healing and wholeness of being God intends for us.

Now, the baptisms we practice in Jesus’ name on any given Sunday is just the outward sign of what happens in us, when we choose to follow where Jesus leads. And following where Jesus leads, to the best of one’s abilities, is how we are baptized by Jesus. Truth be told, there are times, when we truly follow Jesus, that the baptism feels like a baptism by fire. The prophets tell us, though, that such fire is a refining fire and makes us stronger.

As we journey now into this season of Epiphany, we must decide whether we believe the story of Jesus to be true. If we do, then it is important to figure out where Jesus wants us to go. The best place to learn this is right here on Sunday morning, as we worship and learn together the stories of our faith and share with one another the challenges that life

brings. This learning continues, when we try to put into practice things we learn here.

So, this week the challenge is a big one. In and through the baptism of Jesus we learn that we too are loved and lovable, just like Jesus. And, like Jesus, we are not only to look in the mirror each morning and tell ourselves that God, the Source of Life, loves us, we live into that knowledge by sharing it with others.

No practical jokes here; no walking up to the one across the street, whom you dislike, or that annoying office worker and say, “Nah, nah, God loves me! Ha! Ha!” No, the love you acknowledge receiving only has power, when you share it, especially with the one across the street or your fellow office worker.

Sharing God’s love is the foundation of the kingdom life; sharing God’s love supports and makes possible all the other kingdom life activities.

When you commit yourself to following Jesus, you will be igniting the kingdom life, the seed of the Holy Spirit already within you. And when that happens, I promise, things will change – within you, changing you from the inside out.

May God strengthen us and uphold us all, as we seek to ignite the kingdom life in our lives. Amen.