

Genesis 1:1-5

Psalm 29

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

Last Wednesday, January 6 was the Feast of the Epiphany. It falls on the same date every year...just like Christmas and All Saints Day. But this year, our focus was not on the spiritual aspect of our lives that marks this day. This year we were distracted by the events unfolding in the secular world. Without any warning, the Capitol building occupied by our lawmakers and their staffs was overrun by an angry mob. It's the first time such a thing has happened to that sacred building since 1814 when the British tried to burn the building down. The mob we saw on our television screens wasn't trying to burn the building down, they were trying to alter the proceedings that certified the votes cast last November for the government that will take office week after next. We are accustomed to citizens protesting in this country. It's a time-honored tradition that goes back to the revolutionary war. The right to peaceful assembly for the redress of grievances with the government is written into our Constitution, but that's not what we saw on our television sets. We didn't see a peaceful assembly for the redress of grievance. What we saw was very different. Suddenly, the word "Epiphany," which means revelation or uncovering, took on a whole new meaning. What was being revealed to us in the images we saw was an aspect of our country and ourselves that many of us deny on a regular basis. We look at an event like that and we think...or we say, "That's not us. That's not who we are as Americans." But that *is* us. That *is* who we are and we need to look ourselves square in the mirror and be truthful about what we see. Through that lens, the word 'Epiphany' takes on a whole new meaning. What was revealed to us in that moment is something that we not only need to see, but we need to acknowledge.

This morning our gospel lesson told us about the baptism of Jesus. It took place in the Jordan River which is the boundary between the wilderness and the Promised Land. The location of Jesus' baptism was no accident. He had come from Israel, the Promised Land, and when he came up out of the water of the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit embodied in a dove hovered over him, and a voice from heaven claimed him by saying to him, "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well-pleased." After that affirmation of his identity...that revelation of who he is...Jesus went into the wilderness to do battle with the forces of evil and sin. Any of us with children can understand God's claiming of his Son and God's wanting to reveal him to absolutely everybody...Jew and Gentile alike!!

Last Sunday when we celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany we did two things during our service: we received prayers of healing and reconciliation to begin a new year and we renewed our baptismal vows. Do you remember those vows we took just this last Sunday?

We vowed that we would continue in the apostles' teachings and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.

We vowed to persevere in resisting evil, and whenever we fell into sin, we would repent and turn to the Lord.

We vowed to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.

We vowed to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourself.

We also vowed to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?

These vows are easy enough for us to keep with people that we know who may not be as economically sound as we are or who may have cultural differences from us or may be handicapped or infirm or who may just be lonely. That's not too much of a challenge.

But what about the people we saw on our TV screens? Do our baptismal vows extend to them as well?

As Christians, civil disobedience is one of the hallmarks of how we live into our faith. It's not the only way, but there is certainly a precedent for non-violent, peaceful protest in our gospels when such protests serve to protect the defenseless or to release those who are captives or to feed the hungry, or to clothe the naked or to house the homeless or to care for the sick. But what we saw inside the Capitol on the Feast of the Epiphany is *not* compatible with the Christian way of nonviolent protest.

As we celebrate the arrival of the Magi, let's remember what they did when they completed their mission. They had been told by an unscrupulous and ruthless political leader to do something that was both unethical and immoral. The Magi had been asked to return to Herod to tell him where he could find the baby Jesus, the king of the Jews, so that he could worship the baby as well. They suspected King Herod had a different motive for wanting to know where the baby Jesus was. The wise men were advised in a dream to return home by a different way rather than reporting back to King Herod about Jesus' location. When you are asked by a powerful political person to do something that you suspect is unscrupulous or unethical, may you always choose to take a different route!! Turn around and go the other way!

What we saw on our television screens on the Feast of the Epiphany were not actions taken by people who were protecting the rights of the poor or the disenfranchised. Their actions weren't about advocating for universal medical care or for fair housing. Those who stormed the Capitol professed to be doing so to ensure that their way of life—one that openly and proudly

subjugates others—will continue to prevail. They do so because their leadership encourages them to do so. Their leadership appeals to their deepest fears rather than to their better angels. Their leadership encourages them to think only of themselves at a time when many people in the United States are calling for more access, more resources, and more rights for those who have been abused by our country since its founding.

The Christian way of life is not an easy one...for anyone. It's hard to live into all those vows we took at our baptism and periodically renew. At times those vows go against the grain and beckon us to do the exact opposite of what our emotions are telling us to do. Practicing Christianity is hard. It's a struggle. And sometimes we get it wrong. But always, when we miss our footing, all we need to do is look back at those vows that were taken on our behalf and those vows that we took ourselves. Those vows are the guideposts that direct our path. As Christians, we are never called upon to follow a path that leads to violence. We are never called upon to build our lives around the degradation of others. And we are never asked to put ourselves first at the expense of others. Those are all actions that are incompatible with following Jesus Christ.

Practicing Christianity is a radical way of living. It is our duty to pray for those with whom we disagree...not perfunctorily, but sincerely. We are asked to pray intentionally for those who perpetrate violence; for those who demean others; for those who tell lies often and to the detriment of others; for those who wish to do us harm; and for those who would harm those we love. Practicing Christianity is a radical way of living. Jesus never promised us that it would be easy. Jesus promised us that He would be with us always. And what we are unable to do, Jesus can provide us with the strength and the will to do.

If the events of the Feast of the Epiphany taught us nothing else, it taught us this. Half of our country views life very differently than the other half. If we are to become whole and functional as a nation mutually respectful of one another, we will all need to consider the avenue that Jesus gave us to do just that...the radical practice of Christianity. We need to set aside our own emotions, our own fears, our own longings, and listen intently to those who see the world differently. There has never been a time in our history when we could not accomplish the unimaginable when we worked together. Never before have we needed to work together as much as we need to work together now. Never before have we needed to pray for one another as much as we need to pray for one another now. Never has it been more important for us to live into our faith and up to our vows as it is now.

For those of us who are hesitant to step into what Jesus has charged us to do as Christians, just remember this one thing: Jesus vowed to walk with us every step of the way and we know that Jesus keeps his vows. Let's do likewise.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

Sermon inspired by congregational letter written on 01-07-2021 by the Rev. Dr. Noelle York-Simmons,
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