

Sermon for the Baptism of the Lord (First Sunday after the Epiphany)

January 12, 2020

Divine Affirmation

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

No one would dispute the fact that we are living in a secular world. From time to time, as we look around us, it's easy to see the parallels between the lives and struggles of the early church and the lives and struggles of the church today. It's not hard to relate to those little bands of devout and purposeful Christians as they tried to navigate the secular world they lived in...the Roman Empire...and the world they were trying to create and nourish as Jesus' followers...the kingdom of God. One thing for us to consider is that the letters that St. Paul wrote to those little Christian churches could just as easily be written to us today. We are not the majority in our own country. We are not the majority any where in the world. But Christians all over the world are all trying to figure out how to live as Christ commands while living in a very secular environment with different rules and different expectations and different requirements. It's enough to wear a person out! And it's confusing. We're a bit out of step with the world around us...materially and also superficially. For example, for us, Christmas doesn't start just after Halloween or even at Thanksgiving. Christmas *starts* on December 25 and there are twelve days of the Christmas season that follow...until we reach the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6 when the magi arrive. The rest of the world has already removed the Christmas decorations...usually around New Year's. But here we are...we Christians...just recently having taken down our Christmas decorations this past week. I've often wondered if people know what they're singing about when they sing about the "Twelve Days of Christmas."

And do they know anything about the season of Epiphany? Do we know all we should about the season of Epiphany? It's not just one day. It's not just January 6. Epiphany is not just about the arrival of the magi. That's just the beginning of the season. Epiphany moves all the way through January and most of February until we get to Shrove Tuesday and the beginning of Lent the following day. And do we know *what* we are celebrating during the season of Epiphany? We aren't just celebrating the arrival of the magi. We are celebrating the incarnation of God and the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. We begin with the magi who have travelled a very long distance from the East to identify the baby Jesus as the child born king of the Jews...as the long-awaited Messiah of the Jews. Remember...these magi are *not* Jewish. They are not elevating one of their own. They have come from very far away...distant lands...different cultures...different histories...different faith traditions...to identify *this* baby as the Son of God. When they lay eyes on him, there is no hesitation. They immediately bow down

before him. They kneel before him. They worship him. They pay homage to him...not as equals, but as those who are subservient, respectful and obedient. This is the first confirmation from outside the Jewish nation that the Son of God has arrived in the world...and *they* have found him! That's what we celebrate on the Feast of the Epiphany...the revelation of the incarnation of God and it's a celebration that lasts more than just one day.

Today, is the first Sunday *after* the Epiphany. It is another story of the revelation of the identity of Jesus as the Son of God. Throughout Epiphany, we will be reviewing all the times and circumstances in which the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus has been identified. In the gospel lesson that we heard this morning, we were taken to the banks of the Jordan River and the occasion of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. We hear this story several times during the year with a different emphasis on its meaning. In the reading of this passage on the first Sunday after the Epiphany, we hear it as an affirmation by God of the identity of Jesus. As Jesus comes up out of the water after being baptized, the heavens part and the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove and a voice from heaven is heard to say, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Notice that God does not seem to be speaking only to Jesus. If God were speaking only to Jesus, he would have used the second person rather than the third person. He would have said, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Then those words would have been for Jesus' ears only. But God didn't say that in the gospel of Matthew. The voice from heaven was speaking to everyone who *could* hear...to everyone who was *willing* to hear...this affirmation of the identity of Jesus. We have heard that there are none so blind as those who will not see...and now we know, there are none so deaf as those who will not hear! The voice from heaven spoke those words not just in Jesus' ear...but for all the world to hear. God is bragging on Jesus just like a proud parent!

And how potent those words are! We all know what a boost it is to hear someone whose opinion we value say something positive about us! What a glorious affirmation it must have been for Jesus to hear those words directly from his Father...from God. Those are words that Jesus can live on for a very long time, just as we know that we, too, can live on positive affirmations for a very long time. Nothing can energize us more than a positive affirmation. And the more confidence we have in the one who makes that affirmation to us or about us, the more valuable and powerful that affirmation is.

We all struggle with a sense of ourselves...what we refer to as our self-image or our level of self-esteem. By the way, I'm sure all of you know this, but those with adequate self-esteem and a positive self-image are rarely boastful...they don't have to be; they are comfortable with who they are...they are comfortable inside their own skin and they are often the most generous in their affirmations of others. They are easy to be around. They don't struggle much with jealousy and they are not easily hurt by others. Their capacity to absorb the slings and arrows of

outrageous fortune (my apologies to Shakespeare!) seems to be unlimited even though they experience sadness from time to time, grieve the loss of those they love, and feel the bitter disappointment of failure on occasion. They are above all resilient people...able to navigate the treacherous waters of life. Think about the circumstances under which God provided this affirmation to Jesus. It was just at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He was about to go into the wilderness for his 40 day-40 night wrestling match with Satan. He needed all the self-esteem, self-confidence, and affirmation he could get. And he got it from the very highest source.

Sometimes we think about the tragedies that occur in our own lives and in the lives of those around us and wonder 'why?' Sometimes we look at all the devastation in the world and wonder 'Where is God?' Think of the world in which Jesus lived and moved and ministered to others. It was far from an easy life. And Jesus' own life was far from an easy one. He...the Son of Man...had no place to rest his head at night. He had no visible means of support. He was homeless. He was besieged by crowds and had to withdraw from them periodically to collect himself and to commune with God. He needed those affirmations just as we all do. His life was hard and filled with heartbreak and he died an unimaginably cruel and painful death. Do you think that all the hardship and pain that Jesus endured in his life and ministry meant that God had abandoned him or did not love him? Absolutely not! Quite the contrary. We know better. God loved him as God's Son. God identified him as a Son. And God expressed his pride in Jesus' willingness to be obedient to God...even unto death. If God did not spare his Son from the painful aspects of being human, why would we ever think that God would spare us?

At this baptism, John protested that Jesus had come to him to be baptized, but Jesus assured John that the baptism was necessary. Jesus' baptism by John joined him psychologically and spiritually with the people of Israel. This baptism was part of their identity as the people of God and Jesus was part of that identity. It was right that he should join himself with the people of Israel...to participate in this ritual...to align himself with other human beings...and to make a public statement of his willingness to be completely obedient to the will of God.

All of us need affirmations in our lives. All of us need to hear from people whose opinions we value that they claim us as a friend, as a child, as a parent, or as a colleague as one of their own and that they are proud of us. These affirmations are the food that feeds our souls...that keeps us nourished...that inspires us to do our best...and that makes us feel satisfied, gratified and at peace. When we receive these affirmations from other people, we need to remember that God inspired these other person to feed us in this way. God makes these affirmations possible just as God affirmed his only Son, Jesus.

Thanks be to God.
AMEN.