

Heap if a knee

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Sunday, January 27, 2019

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It started with a baptism, an ordinary enough thing. The baptizer may have been a little unusual — wild-eyed, bug-eating John, who lives in the wilderness and is like, getting in touch with nature, dude. When John baptized Jesus, some insist a voice came from the clouds; others say that's nonsense, and it was just thunder, everyone knew it was a cloudy day. A plain dove lit upon Jesus at that moment, though you and I know it was just a common pigeon if you're in our birds of the Bible study.

And I don't know what you were hoping for in the paradox of God's baptism, but there will not be a commanding presence bursting forth that causes all to fall to their knees, blinded and wailing for the mercy that they know they do not deserve. Instead, the second person of the Trinity will be bathed by a dirty hippie's hands in our dirtier river waters. An epiphany. For who? Maybe John. Or Jesus. The crowds. Maybe you?

Then last week, there was a wedding, predicated by that very common miracle of falling in love. And then there was another miracle. Jesus' first order of business was that there would be no business, but mirth. Not sure if you realized it, but he made 150 gallons of wine — an incredible amount, not just enough to wind the party down respectably, but a way of saying it had just begun. Why? You know, it wasn't a widesweeping humanitarian aid for the desperately ill or the end of disease, like we wanted; he did not appear with the judgment against our enemies for which we clamored or to expose the sinfulness which we hide so skillfully that we often fool even ourselves — no, he came for our gladness. An epiphany. For Mary maybe. Or the servants. Maybe you.

And now Jesus goes to church. Like us. Every week, giving the readings, saying the prayers, all his life. He gets up to read the scroll from Isaiah before sitting down to preach about it. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he says. The next sentence reports that "the people were amazed at his words." I don't know if you're particularly amazed. As sermons go, I feel like 9 words ain't much. I'd be amazed if I kept my job if I had a habit of giving 9-word sermons.

Jesus is telling them, in his startling brevity, that this is the kind of Messiah he was going to be. The Hebrew scriptures gave some options for would-be Messiahs: a conquering king to reunify the nation, the exalted priest to bring the former glory into the new temple, the military man who would lead the uprising against the foreign oppressor. But Jesus chose Isaiah — and says this is going to look like hope for the poor and the oppressed, God's favor proclaimed; he will be the bruised reed, the suffering servant. Difficult words to hear for all who believe worldly ways of power to be God's ways, too. An epiphany.

I love that we have an entire season dedicated to this experience called an epiphany. A revelation without warning, an insight out of nowhere, a brief glimpse of understanding, that feeling when something searched for clicks suddenly into place. It's a funny thing — of all the feelings and experiences in life, to

have a chunk of every year dedicated to this peculiar sensation of a new understanding. Maybe you're thinking, "I'm not sure I've had an epiphany this season, I should try harder to have one," but you shouldn't! It's not like learning, an epiphany's very nature means it can't be controlled or willed.

It's a fleeting, finicky thing and you can't even explain it very easily when it does happen. I remember being very young and having been taught the concepts of multiplication, but not really understanding. My cousin Dwight and I were playing in the hay mow of my grandparents' old barn, and talking about my frustration with multiplication — when I had this sudden rush of insight. I'll remember it forever, the way I stopped with wide eyes, the sunlight brilliant gold in the clouds of dust we were kicking up as though the God of Math Himself had shined his rays upon me. For whatever reason, after that moment, I could do it and I understood what I was doing.

You've had this happen, right? And with better things than multiplication tables, right? Like after studying a foreign language forever and suddenly realizing that you're not just translating, but reading it? Or that moment when reading sheet music became natural?

Now, the funny characteristic about these epiphanies is that they don't actually just come out of nowhere. It's an insight into something you've been paying deep attention to for some time. You read French because you've dedicated yourself to French. You learn multiplication because you've already been working at math for years. There is an ordinariness, even a mundanity, at the core of these epiphanies.

So, too, with the stories we're telling of Jesus. The wedding, typical to the point of a stereotype that some detail will be dropped or some disaster occur — this common thing as a sort of wild insight into God's character. An ordinary sermon, first being amazing because it's brief, am I right? But really because no one knows what to do with the type of Messiah Jesus is describing. We still don't.

Even the baptism — now you all know that we believe in baptizing once, that God's work is fully complete in that one immersion, no need to do it again because nothing can undo that work, period. But I like that some scholars think that Jesus might have been baptized loads of time — ritual bathing was very common, particularly among the Essenes who were right in the thick of things in Jesus' time. Imagine — Jesus going for the weekly cleanse, and then — sudden insight. I don't know if it's true, but I like it.

We come here every week bringing the works of our lives. We take some, let's admit it, pretty unspectacular bread and wine, and we say these holy words and proclaim it God's own Body and Blood. But even something that preposterous and fantastic can become ordinary when you do it all the time. You know that it's okay that it is, right, that you've memorized the words and sometimes have found your mind wandering reciting them? That's the point — that the Word be so near you as to find its way into your habits and patterns.

Look, I had an epiphany once. I was at a woman's bedside giving last rites, those words we say to greet the pitiless and unyielding ordinariness of death. She was a lifelong Episcopalian, and her life had the blessed combination of being both long and good. She had been unresponsive for days, hadn't eaten or drunk in that time, I would later know it was a few hours before the end. But as her family and I all stood there holding hands, we reached the part where we say the Lord's Prayer, and I watched this woman's lips begin move, to mouth the forms of words, joining us in a silent and miraculous recitation of those common words. Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

An epiphany. They're hard to explain. The sudden gleam of the miraculous off the scuffed surface of the ordinary. It is our part to pay attention — to the pigeons, the wine, the thunder, the hay mow. For attention, as the great Mary Oliver said — attention is the first act of devotion.