

Sermon for 10 January 2010 Epiphany 1C – St. Francis

As Yogi Berra once said, “Its de ja vu all over again.” Less than a month ago we stood on the shore of the River Jordan and listened as John the Baptizer predicted that his baptism of water would be replaced by the Messiah’s baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This time, however, our reading includes Luke’s telling of the events immediately after Jesus’ baptism. Luke’s telling of these events clearly place Jesus there in the midst of a crowd. For quite some time, I have visited repeatedly a stained glass window that is viewable from the road. In that window men and women are standing close to one another in the water. One of the women holds an infant in her arms. The crowd gazes upwards and watches as the heavens open and a dove descends. Along with the dove flames also descend on those encircled by water. They, in turn, appear dazzled by the power of the heavens opening and the visible presence of the Holy Spirit. I find myself trying to join with the crowd in the picture as I gaze.

That is what Luke invites us to do in our reading today. The picture he paints is of Jesus fresh from the waters of baptism standing with “all the people”. How easy it is to imagine standing there next to Jesus. As we stand dripping with water and filled with expectation of something new, something different ahead. We see the heavens open and the kingdom of God expanded right into ours. We see the descent of the Holy Spirit. We hear the voice of God speaking words of blessing, words of praise for this man of God. In the midst of this revelation the question is can we, like Jesus, hear God’s blessing on us?

In this season of Epiphany we focus on how “The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us.” We acknowledge that God revealed God’s self in someone that people could see, touch, and hear. It is the other side of that equation with which we struggle. If God could show forth in a human then we, like Jesus are beloved by God. Can we hear that we are beloved by God? Long before the Apostle’s Creed was developed for Baptism God was using the language of family: terms of endearment and words of welcome abound in Luke’s portrait of baptism. The reading from Isaiah tells us that God proclaims: “You are precious in my sight and honored and I love you. The words are clearly spoken but can we hear them? It has been said that we only see what we expect and understand. We expect to hear God’s blessing on Jesus but do we expect to clearly hear God’s blessing on each one of us? To be honest, I have found that even when I can verbalize this blessing for others I am not so successful in fully embracing the fact that I am beloved by God.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner writes of the struggle to open our eyes to God's presence at work in our lives. As he does he shares this ancient rabbinic legend that tells the perspective of two men who were with the children of Israel as God's kingdom broke into the waters and parted the Red Sea. He writes: "The sea split and the waters stood like great walls, while Israel escaped to freedom on the distant shore. Awesome, but not for everyone... Reuven and Shimon hurried along among the crowd crossing through the sea. But they never once looked up. They noticed only that the ground beneath their feet was still a little muddy – like a beach at low tide. 'This is terrible!' said Reuven, 'There's mud all over the place!' 'Disgusting!' said Shimon, 'I'm in muck up to my ankles!' 'You know what?' replied Reuven, 'When we were slaves in Egypt, we had to make our bricks out of mud just like this!' 'Yeah,' said Shimon. 'There's no difference between being a slave in Egypt and being free here.' And so it went, Reuven and Shimon whining and complaining all the way across the bottom of the sea. For them there was no miracle, only mud. Their eyes were closed. Even though they walked right through it, they might as well been asleep."

Are we guilty of only looking down at the mud and missing God's glory in the world around us? Jesus' baptism was not a private event set apart from us rather it was a public event set in the midst of us. God's voice still booms from heaven: You are my son, you are my daughter, you are beloved, with you I am well pleased. Let us join with the crowd around Jesus and look up. Let us open our ears and our hearts. Let us truly hear God's blessing. For only then can we live wholly as God's children.

