January 10, 2021

The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ

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It is difficult for me to find words to express my reaction to the events of the past week. My emotions have run the gamut. The rioters in the capital of our country, wearing t-shirts with ugly white supremacist slogans carrying the confederate flag and defiling a powerful symbol of our nation, caused strong emotions to well up within me. Anger, disgust, sadness, anxiety, and sometimes glimmers of hope, all surfaced on a very powerful level. Tears have come more than once in the past few days as I watch the images of what took place expose a frightening facet of this country that I truly love. I am a lawyer and a priest, a strong believer in both process and symbol, both of which have been damaged and defiled in the last few days and the last four years. I do not normally like preaching about politics, but this is not a normal time, this is not a normal week. This is not a normal year. I am not 100% sure I can even remember what normal is.

         As the initial rush of powerful emotion has cooled somewhat to a slower burn, I have thought long and hard about what would be a proper response in the context of a sermon. I had a nice, tidy, and I hoped pithy and theologically sound sermon about Jesus’ baptism already written and taped for today. Events are such that I’m unable to let that one fly. We need to talk about what’s going on in our world. What I have been trying to focus on is how to respond to the events that have taken place in the context of our faith, as Christians, as followers of Jesus. I often speak in broad terms about core theological concepts that we hope will inform our day to day lives. I have been asking myself just what some of these broad concepts have to tell us about our response to what has happened in our nation’s capital.

         I’m speaking of some of the foundational underpinnings of our faith, concepts like incarnation and our role in bringing about the kingdom of God. These are concepts I talk about all of the time. So I’ve been wondering what I can glean from them to share with you as we walk together through these troubled and troubling times and events. I don’t have any well thought out, highly structured answers for you. But I do want to share some of the thoughts that have come to me as I reflect on all that has happened.

         For me, as I have often said, the concept of the incarnation is much more than simply God becoming human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Christ, the Word made flesh, coeternal with the father, is a part of our humanity, and not simply in a broad, overarching sense. It is true *in the particular*. God is within each of us; we carry a very real spark of the divine within us. We call this inner presence of the divine “Christ.”

         It is a foundational aspect of who we are as humans, and so it can, if we allow it and if we nourish it, *cause* something within us; give us certain gifts. I want to mention two of these gifts that this indwelling of Christ offers to each of us, both individually and collectively as a worshiping community, the gifts of hope and agency.

         I have hope, a gift of the divine. On the same day that that ugly symbol of violence, the battle flag of my traitorous ancestors, the rebel flag, was carried into the capital for the first time in the history of our nation, something else happened. In the state of Georgia, a 33-year-old Jew and an African American pastor were elected as senators. This is not a small thing. This is Georgia, which admittedly is not Mississippi, but it’s not Virginia either. This election tells of a significant and very real change that is happening in our country.

         This change didn’t occur in a vacuum. It was brought about by the work of many Georgians and many Americans led by Stacey Abrams who worked tirelessly to undo the disenfranchisement that is so pernicious and widespread in our nation. And this leads me to the other gift of the incarnation, agency. *We* can bring about change. The spark of the divine that is within us gives us power, and a responsibility to use our power to bring about aspects of God’s kingdom.

         One of our parishioners told a story of her and her son reacting to the events of this past week in the context of the protests that occurred in Richmond over the summer, particularly in terms of the response of authority to the events. I share this story with her permission. While in Richmond they could sit on their porch and hear the helicopters, sirens and flash bombs of the police. But as they watched the riots in Washington there was nothing of the sort, no comparable reaction by those in authority.

“None of this was lost on [my son]” she said, “at 11 years old, he understands the depth of this racist inequity. But he can not at all understand how all the grown-ups allowed this to happen.” The awareness of this young man gives me hope and the sharing of this story speaks to me of agency. Hope and agency. These are our gifts. These are our responsibilities.

         I want to close this morning’s reflection with a prayer, one that you have all heard before. It is in our prayer book. It is also a prayer that the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, quoted from in her first remarks from the Speaker’s podium after the rioters were cleared from the capital and the House resumed its work. It is the St. Francis prayer. Join with me as we pray it together.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is
hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where
there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where
there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where
there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to
be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is
in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we
are born to eternal life. *Amen.*