

PREACHED IN THE PARISH OF ST JAMES, MONCTON

The Sunday after Epiphany, Baptism of our Lord

January 8, 2023

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

The last time I was here, in the waning days, the dark days, of December, we were wakened up in the long night with Joseph, dreaming, pondering and finally determining to look after Mary as the child grew in the warm darkness of her womb. The long nights of winter, the dying of the year, wonder and hope and determination to get up and keep on keeping on.

It's changed. We have a huge ice ridge across the front of our yard on the Miramichi, on the very edge of our lawn, pushed up by the incredible wind storms we had this fall. The ridge of ice was ten feet above our lawn, which make it twenty feet and more above the beach. The sheer force of nature. But this past week, as the skies have turned blue and the sun shone, and the temperature have hovered ever so slightly about freezing, there have been loud cracks of ice breaking and the ridge is subsiding. We can already feel the returning strength of the light and the eventual, inevitable coming of spring. It will be slow. But it will come. A new year has begun.

The gospel today brings us in this brilliant sunshine on the Jordan River—in the Judean desert, as dry as any place on earth. We've come at the call of John the Baptist, who is, as he himself says, the voice of one crying out in the desert, preparing the way of the Lord. He echoes the ancient, heartfelt cry of Isaiah the prophet and the people of the ancient troubled, wearied, land, that God himself would come down, that he would rend the skies and crack open the earth, and smooth the way in the desert. That the injustice and the oppression and the hopelessness and the grinding unknowing would suddenly cease. It's enough already.

John takes us back to our very beginnings, to the spot where Israel first marched under the lead of Joshua, successor to Moses, through the waters of the Jordan. He's calling the people to a new beginning. To a light-filled reckoning---not simply to blame the hopelessness they have been experiencing on their enemies---or, yes, it's true, read the psalms and the prophets, on God. Rather they, we, are called to come to terms with who they've let themselves become: complacent at the best, and complicit at the worse. Frozen in hopelessness. His cry in the desert is to repent, to turn. Never mind the crimes of others, ask yourself what you've done, or, perhaps more to the point, haven't done.

With us this morning is this quiet man comes, coming to John. His cousin, son of the gentle Mary. John protests—I should be baptized by you. But Jesus appeals to John's message: you're crying for righteousness, for justice, for truth, for accountability, for the way forward. This is the way. Let it be so now. It is proper for us to see how God does justice. You want to see the heavens open, the way of the desert become the royal road of Isaiah's prophecy. Baptize me.

And suddenly, like the sun shattering broken ice, the revelation happens. The skies are torn open and from the light comes the voice of God: This, this, is my Son, the Beloved. With whom I am well pleased. This man coming up out of the water, is human, but he is also divine. The dearly beloved Son. Given at the cost all parents know when their children go out into the world to serve and to suffer. More than even we can know. Jesus submits himself to the needs and conditions of fallen humanity, our sinfulness, our brokenness, our failure. Our constant need to begin again. And finally, yes finally, the inevitability of our death, which is what baptism has always signified. When, Jesus, God with us, comes up out of the water, finally, the heavens are open, We see into the heart of God, the essence of the universe. The only begotten Son who dwells in the bosom of God. And from this window opened into the heart of reality comes, the gift of life itself—the very spirit that rested on the teeming floods of creation, dove that signaled the end of the flood in Moses day, the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, and rests upon Jesus, God become man to deliver him.

So now--where is God? Where is God in the face of all that's happening? How does God operate in this world when we think a great violent uprising

might possibly be the best solution to our woes. That blame for everything can be placed upon those others—over there, or that other party. In the very heart of thing. Bearing all things, believing all things, enduring all thing. In the life and death of Jesus raising all things. We will be baptized in his baptism—he tells the apostles that---but here is our invitation to freely and willingly say, let it be. It is fitting for us. Living, truly living, in the waters, knowing that God himself calls us.

Almost unknown in the heart of the English countryside these days is a parish priest who originally came from Nigeria. He has become a profound poet of faith. He has a web page if you want to hear him recite his own sonnets. But here he is celebrating the Baptism of Christ:

Beginning here we glimpse the Three-in-one;  
The river runs, the clouds are torn apart,  
The Father speaks, the Spirit and the Son  
Reveal to us the single loving heart  
That beats behind the being of all things  
And calls and keeps and kindles us to light.  
The dove descends, the spirit soars and sings  
'You are beloved, you are my delight!'

In that quick light and life, as water spills  
And streams around the Man like quickening rain,  
The voice that made the universe reveals  
The God in Man who makes it new again.  
He calls us too, to step into that river  
To die and rise and live and love forever.