

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

January 11, 2009

Epiphany 1B 2009

Feast of the Lord's Baptism

In the Name of our one living God, ever creating, ever loving and ever sustaining:
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's readings for the feast of the Baptism of our Lord are about God's self-revelation. They talk about identities – ours and God's – and about relationship and decision.

Our reading from the Hebrew Scripture is the majestic opening words of the Bible. They were obviously well thought out since they set the tone for what follows and they deal with the relationship between the Creator and Creation. The Jewish creation story is fascinating for a number of reasons and it differs from all other accounts of Creation from the ancient world. Its lack of interest in the heavenly world is remarkable. Everything occurs and deals with what occurs beneath the celestial realm. It lacks the common and frequently violent stories of heavenly battles among the gods in the heavenly realm and deals with the observable world. It views the universe as the purposeful product of divine intelligence – one self-sufficient Being who is sovereign over all. The holiness – the mystery and otherness – of the Divine One is firmly established.

If you read the account carefully you will see that creation occurs in dark muck of the primeval chaos and not out of thin air. God enters and creates the universe out

of the turbulence, the uncertainty, the unpredictable disorder of the unformed and void - by sending God's "*ruah*", God's living breath or spirit – over the face of the formless and turbulent waters. On each of the "days" of Creation, you'll notice that God does three things: first, God calls forth order out of chaos by separating things out; secondly, God names what emerges from the creative process – thus establishing both God's connection with and power over what is created; finally God observes and blesses – declaring Creation good.

Mark's account of Jesus' baptism by John has been controversial – why would the sinless need to accept John's baptism of repentance? Matthew seeks to explain it by putting Jesus clearly in a primary role; John avoids it; Luke breezily glides over it. I think Mark is using the imagery of Genesis to tell of his and his community's experience of God's self-revelation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus enters the dark waters of the Jordan; just as creation occurred in the disorder of the primeval chaos, now the saving act of God is revealed creating anew in the disordered and chaotic muck of human nature. God's "*ruah*" – God's living and life-giving breathe or spirit is seen in a human being as the heavens are torn apart and God's spirit descends upon Jesus who unites the Creator and Creation. God observes and names – "You are my Son, the Beloved." Finally God blesses: "with you I am well pleased." A new creation is being called forth and revealed in Jesus.

This account got me thinking of my own baptism on the feast of the Epiphany, 1946 and the baptism I will do on January 25th of little Ryan Guest – baby Jesus in our Christmas pageant. I was baptized with just my parents and godparents present in a private ceremony. I was being "done", what was then called "christened". The

theology of that time focused on the ancient Latin church's doctrine Original Sin and the salvation of my little soul.

The scene will be different on January 25th because the 1979 Book of Common Prayer puts the Baptismal Covenant at the heart of the Church's theology. It is no longer a private act focused on the one to be baptized and the eradication of Original Sin, but a public celebration at the principal Sunday service incorporating that child or adult into the Body of Christ that continues the ministry of Jesus Christ on earth – the reconciliation of all Creation with God. It is participating in life of Christ by bringing closer the Kingdom of God – the world the way God would have it be.

Baptism is not someone being “done” but is something we do – we turn from what distracts us from God and spend our lives growing into what God wants us to be and to do. Baptism isn't something that happens, it is something that is becoming, something that is growing and lived out. We do this by study and prayer, by participating in worship and the sacraments and by working to do justice and being compassionate to others and to all life. When I baptize I anoint with oil the child or adult and say, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.” That's heavy stuff – we are called to accept participating in the life of Christ. This view of Baptism is orthodox and reflects the theology of the ancient Eastern or Greek Church Fathers.

The 1979 BCP caused a lot of controversy. It was a turn away from Calvinist theology and solo scriptura (the Scriptures as the only source of authority) and placing an increasing emphasis on the continuing active guidance of the Holy Spirit and our growth into and participation with Christ in God's work in Creation. It grew out of serious biblical scholarship and the Early Church Fathers.

When the Archbishop of Canterbury came to address (or maybe to redress) our House of Bishops, he commented that he was surprised that the Episcopal Church took so seriously and placed so much emphasis on the Baptismal Covenant. Frankly, I was surprised that the Archbishop was surprised. I mean we have been using this BCP for 30 years already and it arose out of a lot of theological and liturgical scholarship that was going on for at least 50 years before it was adopted.

I think restoring baptism to the heart of our theology and worship is something we should celebrate on this Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. If other churches in the Anglican Communion want to use the English Book of Common Prayer of 1662 and adopt its underlying principals, that is fine with me – I just don't think that is going to happen here. When you get down to it, I believe it is these fundamental differences in theology and outlook that are causing the difficulties in the Church and not the current incumbent Bishop of New Hampshire. I don't think there will be a resolution until we have serious discussions of these fundamental issues rather than being distracted by wedge issues. I personally think there is room for disagreement. Baptism unites us and is a much stronger bond than the matters that seem to divide us. I teach that to my preschoolers – we are all God's children. That's why we are all special and why we don't push or hit one another.

Amen.