

Sermon: Epiphany I

The Rev. Mike Wernick

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Year B
Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

Like all of you here today... I'm a member of the group called human beings... like all of you... a child of my parents... like some of the men here... I belong to several groups... I'm an uncle... a nephew... a cousin... a brother... and a father... in many ways... very ordinary...

But I've had some experiences that not all of you have had... I'm a member of that group of people who have taken flying lessons... but never actually gotten their pilot's license... I'm a member of that group of people who acted and sang in civic theatre... but never aspired to Broadway... I'm a member of that group of people who've been to the Statue of Liberty three times... the first time in my mother's uterus... who at ten years old regularly travelled to NYC by myself... and rode the subways and busses... I'm a member of that group of people who owned a 10" reflecting telescope... and who has calculated the diameter of the universe in miles... I'm a member of that group of people who have been to Navio Beach in Puerto Rico... I'm a member of that smaller group of people who was a substitute teacher... for one day... I'm a member of that even smaller group of people who visited with singer Melissa Manchester... in her hotel room... after a concert... and sat on her bed with her... a member of that group of people who have known something intuitively... I'm a member of that group of people who have learned about myself... and about life... after much pain and denial...

Experiences like these... and all you have had your own unique experiences... form us... they provide opportunities for us to gain insights... make connections... learn lessons... but they don't make us *better than* anyone else...

I'm also a member of that group of people who converted to Christianity... attended seminary... and were ordained... and while I take some pride in that... it doesn't make me special or *better than*... in many ways it allows me to face my ordinariness... because I'm also a member of that group of people who has realized... that I can't solve all of my... or other people's problems... all by myself... that God can provide solutions I can't imagine... I'm someone who has come to appreciate the value of silence... of listening to the Holy Spirit...

And today's Gospel is about listening... today's Gospel is about being open to the Spirit... today's Gospel is about power... Jesus comes up out of the water... and the Heavens are torn apart... the veil between here and there... between the manifest and the unmanifest... is withdrawn... and God's creative power is made present... as it was in the beginning... when God said... let there be light... in today's Gospel... God acknowledges a different kind of Light... God's own incarnate presence... God's Spirit... descending like a dove... and why like a dove and not like thunder... because God's invitation is always gentle and never coercive...

Fr. Richard Rohr wrote... The belief that God is "out there" is the basic dualism that is tearing us all apart. Our view of God as separate and distant has harmed our relationships with sexuality, food, possessions, money, animals, nature, politics, and our own incarnate selves. This loss explains why we live such distraught and divided lives. Jesus came to put it all together for us... and in us. He was saying, in effect, "To be human is good!"

He continues... Far too much of religion has been about defining where God is and where God isn't, picking and choosing who and what has God's image and who and what doesn't. In reality, it's not up to us. We have no choice in the matter. All are beloved. Everyone—Catholic and Protestant, Christian and Muslim, black and white, gay and straight, able-bodied and disabled, male and female, Republican and Democrat

—all are children of God. We are all members of the Body of Christ, made in God's image, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, whether or not we are aware of this gift.

Yesterday's Epiphany readings tell about the Wise Men from the East... who were able to discern... who were able to recognize this heavenly... this other-worldly presence... and they came to pay him homage... but Herod was frightened... and wanted to eliminate this powerless yet all-powerful Infant of Light... you see... the Baptism of Jesus is about power... there's a new power at work in the world... and when Jesus is baptized... when Jesus comes into his power... other entities lose power... the Herods of the world... and their agendas... can never compare to God's plan for creation... can never stand on equal footing... and can never come out on top...for whatever reasons... some of them want to do what those who built the Tower of Babel wanted to do... and make a name for themselves...

Cynthia Bourgeault says that Jesus came to help people awaken... "but awakening is not that easy... and as a *moshel meshalim*... a Master of Wisdom... Jesus had mixed success... as the four Gospels all record... some people glimpsed what he was saying... while others missed it altogether... some people got it part of the time... and missed it the rest... some people woke up and others remained asleep... how does one awaken... how do we move through our lives... taking in information and experiences... toward greater aliveness and wholeness... how can we be roused from our sleep... and be open to God's transformative grace... and love... you see... God loves us... even when we don't feel worthy of that love... or the love of anyone else... but we are worthy...

So we have choices... we can believe that the experiences we have make us better than others... more deserving than others... more elevated than others... instead of just neutrally providing opportunities to be formed more and more into the image of God... we can hold on to things the way they used to be... we can resist change so that we

can hold on to our power... we can identify with the Herods of the world... and try to hang on to the identity we want... and live in danger of trying to snuff out Jesus...

Or we can be open to what the Holy Spirit is doing... what Christ is doing... and be able to let go of what was... so we can take hold of what will be...

In baptism... we are all members of the largest group... children of God... and God continues to pour God's identity onto us as Christians... God continues to pour new identity on the church... for the sake of the world... but many of us... and many North American Christians fear that church is dying... we say we believe that death leads to new life... but so far at least... a dying identity is one we'd rather not have... the same way Jesus resisted his identity in the Garden... but we can embrace the identity that Jesus is giving his church... then like the Wise Men... we will yield to Jesus' Kingship... and offer him our gifts... in pursuit of the identity he's giving us... a more cooperative identity... calling us together...

In this new year... let's pray about the new identity that Jesus is bringing to the church... and ask for the will and resolve to pursue it... even if it means letting go of the identity we want... in ways we can barely comprehend... it'll be better than we can imagine...

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