

Sermon: Epiphany I

Mr. Kevin Barry

January 11, 2015

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

I'd like to thank each and every one of you for braving the elements following our weather week that was somewhat reminiscent of the events described in our reading of Psalm 29 today, but with a frigid white winter spin to it. It is hard to fathom that the last time I stood at this pulpit was over a year and a half ago in June 2013 when, believe it or not, the high temperature for the day was over 60 degrees more than our temperature this morning!

To shake your memories loose a little more, I actually did preach one more time in November of that same year, but only at Ascension's former home on 44th Street because of a variety of scheduling conflicts that month. I do believe a few Holy Cross members did stop on over for service that day, with a written copy of the sermon made available for everyone's reading pleasure. The main reason I mention this is that although today's readings are not really related to those of my previous preaching opportunities, the universality of the Word has resulted in my ending all 3 sermons pretty much the same way.

You may be asking yourself, "Why the long intermission between sermons?" I will not bore you with all the details, but suffice it to say that the reasons had to do with a Lutheran lay person preaching in front of the two churches without certain required training and "licensing." Recently the Episcopal Diocese of Western Michigan granted Holy Cross special experimental worship practice status, with the ELCA North/West Lower Michigan Synod agreeing that members of Ascension could preach as long as what is preached is within the standards emitted in a document known as "The Use of the Means of Grace." Thank you to Pastor Mike for patiently working with the respective

Bishops and their staffs to bring me back into the fold – and anyone else who may decide in the future to take a leap of faith (and nerves) to preach as well.

Enough with the introductory comments - Let's get into the simple gifts that God has shared with us today to share with others in our readings. And a little experimenting ...

I learned in my previous experiences in front of you during service that this standing at the lectern and reading verbatim from a written sermon is not for me – In the various ministry roles that I have been part of in the past, I have spent plenty of time up front either running or assisting in meetings and presentations of various kinds. But never just standing still and reading while gripping onto a podium like my life depended on it.

I've decided that today's readings lend themselves nicely to a little more relaxed kind of preaching in order to properly share God's gifts in the way He intended.

We all know the saying "Sometimes the best gifts come in small packages." In our case today, I would like to replace "small" with "simple."

When I looked in our newsletter to see what today's readings were scheduled to be, I was struck by how unbelievable it was that I was going to get to preach on two of the most well known passages in the Bible. Literally the first words in the Old Testament plus the baptism of Jesus himself, passages that we hear sermons about every single year. Talk about true gifts for me!

Genesis, Chapter 1, Verses 1 through 5: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the water. Then God said, (clear throat) "Let there be light"; and there was light.

Academic types love to debate the whole gamut of theories of creation. Among the more common ones are – and I am not making these up - Panspermia, Biopoesis, Cosmogeny, Endosymbiosis, Spontaneous Generation, Clay Theory, Theory of

Consecutive Creations, Materialistic Theory, and Organic Evolution. Our Genesis story is said to be the Theory of Special Creation. My inclination is that you can come up with at whole plethora of explanations and lengths of time of how our universe, galaxy, solar system, planet, and creatures were created, but ultimately this was all done by the hand of God with continued oversight and adjustments.

How is this simple? The language of Genesis is the simple part. Authors are known to fret for what they feel are interminable amounts of time for the perfect opening line of their manuscripts – God’s is as simple as “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth ...” God leaves the interpretation to us, but makes sure to let us know through the scriptures that it was He who created it all and has announced to everyone that He “Let there be light” and His will was done. And will always be done.

Fast forward through history (and the Bible) to the beginning of the Gospel of Mark. “The Baptism of Jesus.” Sparsity of the word in Chapter 1, Verse 9 again is the key – “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” No wordy details dealing with the type of water, the amount of water, the words spoken by John, the physical actions of John, the appropriate age to be baptized, the number of times to be baptized, or anything else. Simplicity that religious academics have been debating for thousands of years with no better example being the document I mentioned earlier that sermons in the ELCA must be consistent with – “The Use of the Means of Grace. A Statement on the Practice of Word and Sacrament. Adopted for Guidance and Practice. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.” Approximately ½ the pages in this 63-page “statement” contain the word “baptism.”

This gift of simple baptism was followed up by God with the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus and God declaring “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” God reaffirms his creation and lets Jesus know that He is following the path as He has intended. As we know, Jesus grabs onto this gift and departs on his ministry after spending 40 days in the wilderness, passing this gift onto his disciples, and

exponentially through generations of their disciples, to us. The epitome of “the gift that keeps on giving.”

Interestingly Jesus chooses to hold onto this gift from his Father and not once in the Gospels is there any mention of Jesus baptizing anyone with water, not even his disciples. Mark, Matthew, and Luke do not definitively mention Jesus conducting a baptism with water, and John 4, Verses 1 & 2 specifically states that Jesus had “learned that the Pharisees had heard Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John – although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized.” Instead he fills his disciples with the Holy Spirit and in the Great Commission commands them to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” God and Jesus could have easily done this work themselves, but chose that it would be much more effective for their people to do the work and give them the fulfilling, life affirming gift of taking part in bringing others to the Lord.

This remains true to this day for all followers of The Way, including those of us here at Ascension and Holy Cross pairing up to assist each other as the Two Churches. We all know deep in our hearts and souls that, as Christians who have been commissioned to spread The Word about these gifts, that we have the tools let everyone else know you believe and want others to believe as well. Yet we Lutherans and Episcopalians are struggling to keep our congregations afloat and relevant. We have spent much time, money, and emotion attempting to reverse our dwindling numbers. It seems like the hardest part is determining how to start.

Maybe spreading the news of simple gifts starts with simple steps. The simplest step of all is making it obvious that you are a Christian in our diverse America with many around us seeming to worship a multitude of idols. I do not mean walking the streets with a sandwich board announcing you believe in God or shouting from the rooftops. But things like looking around your own home – If you have a new visitor to your house, can they easily tell you are a Christian and what church you are a member of? I can tell

you that if you enter the Barry home, you may think our top priority beyond family is the Green Bay Packers! I asked our youngest daughter, Beth, to go throughout our house and count up the number of items we own that obviously symbolize the Packers and Christianity. Embarrassingly the numbers were pretty much even, with many of the Christian items being music books that are not sitting out in blatantly obvious places. And we definitely do not have any Christianity related flags to fly out front on Sundays! Those of us who had significant exposure to Catholic homes remember those homes that literally had shrines in them to God, a saint or two, and the Pope. I am not advocating decorating to that extreme. A cross – Pictures from church-related activities – Framed cute & witty sayings on the wall or on tables. You get the idea.

The same goes for how we hold ourselves out in public. An example would be Christian jewelry that can easily be seen like a cross on a visible necklace. How many of you own an Ascension or Holy Cross t-shirt? Or a t-shirt received for volunteering on a mission trip or Thrivent Financial event? Wear these out and about and not just to church or other similar volunteer events, but around town.

Call these first steps whatever you like. Simply Simple. Easy Peasy. The Gifts of God for the People of God.

Later you too can move onto flashy LED signs on your front lawn programmed by Pastor Mike from his phone ...

Thank you for again granting me the privilege of preaching and making the effort to worship with us despite, and in spite of, the weather. Now “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.”