

Sermon – Sunday of Epiphany 1, 2017

St Margaret's Church, Plainview

Last Friday the church celebrated the feast of the Epiphany, a day that recognizes and causes us to remember the manifestation of the divine nature of Jesus to the Gentiles, first represented by the Magi. We remember this event as the first time the outside world came into contact with Jesus, the beloved child of God.

Epiphanies can happen to any one of us. Maybe some of you could recall moments in your life where God revealed Gods self to you in an epiphany. Just as the Magi were guided by the star to their rendezvous with Jesus, so God reveals to us our divine calling if we are open to receiving it.

I would not be standing here today without being open to the spirit of God that manifested in an epiphany to me. Nearly seven years ago I came to visit New York City during a period of uncertainty in my life. I'd reached a cross road in my career and church life and I was unsure of what to do next. After attending Sunday service at the cathedral of St John the Divine I walked up Amsterdam Ave and on to the campus of Columbia University. I had never visited the university in my many earlier visits to New York.

As I was standing in front of Daniel French's sculpture *Alma Mater* majestically gazing out at the body of the university, I had what I would describe as a strong feeling of clarity that I should return to post graduate study. This divine manifestation of God's call changed the course of my life dramatically, and also changed the dynamics of my family. When I returned to Australia I began a period of what I would now describe as discernment to figure out exactly what God was revealing to me. I discussed what I had experienced with my friends and priests and one suggested that I read some books by Parker Palmer and Henri Nouwen. One of those books was *Life of the Beloved*, by Henri Nouwen. Maybe you are familiar with it as it's quite widely read.

Nouwen writes the book as an offering to a friend of his, a young Jewish man. He had grown fond of this man and wanted to give him something that would speak to the bond of friendship between them. He draws upon the last verse of today's gospel reading from Matthew. "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Nouwen saw use all as the Beloved of God and that we can share this gift of belovedness with others. "You are the Beloved of God" he told his friend.

This voice of God continues to call us the Beloved. In a world of distracting voices it can be hard to take in this profound statement. We have voices both internally and externally continually telling us that we are no good, or that we are worthless, or that we hold the wrong set of values and beliefs. We may feel that these voices are telling us that unless we can come to their point of view, unless we can achieve academic success, material wealth or develop a greater sense of arrogance and independence, we will remain unloved. When we strip away all these distractions, a sense of self-rejection can lie deep within. Nouwen calls self rejection the "greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the Beloved. Being the beloved he says "expresses the core truth of our existence."

The question for us today is whether we can hear that soft voice of God calling us the Beloved, revealing to us our Belovedness, just as we are. Are we able to tell our family and friends that this same voice is calling out to them too to let them know that they are the Beloved, just as God called Jesus the Beloved after his baptism.

In a beautiful assemblage of verses from scripture Nouwen reveals the beauty of God's call to us, and the divine nature into which we are grafted at our baptisms. "I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on whom my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with the care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me. I am your father, your mother, your brother, your sister, your lover, and your spouse ... yes, even your child ... wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one."

Today we remember the baptism of Jesus by John. We might ask why indeed did Jesus needed to be baptized considering he had been born of God for God's commission. In baptism, this outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, we are bound into fellowship with Jesus, with God and with the Holy Spirit, and are made one with them. In baptism we are also bound into our community of faith where together we worship our God, grow in our faith and care for one another as we journey deeper into our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Jesus says that he needed to be baptized to fulfill all righteousness (v15), in other words to make right the conduct of the community and to correct observance of the Law. This was a remedy to the waywardness of the Israelites and the Gentiles who continued to misapply the Law and worship idols. The nature of God was love, justice and mercy and the community had lost its way in living by these principles as God intended.

In Jesus baptism, the spirit of God descended upon him and began his transformation into his ministry to call out all people as God's Beloved. The way Jesus went about his ministry and life is in a way the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that we hear about in today's Hebrew Bible reading from Isaiah 42. What Isaiah says can be equally applied to us as to Jesus. The essence of a transformed life is that justice will be brought to all the nations, we will act quietly and show justice by our actions, we will be persistent until justice has been done, we will be a light to the world to open the eyes of the blind, we are heralds for the future restoration of the kingdom, and we are called to restore people to unity with God through Jesus Christ.

Jesus was baptized so as to be bound back into God in an outward and visible way. He was baptized, and his disciples were baptized, so as they could join together on the journey of life that we are invited into everyday, the journey of the Beloved of God. Our ministry to each other, and to the world, is to continue to acknowledge this truth, the truth that each of us is God's Beloved not matter what race, gender, religion or

political beliefs we may hold. As Christians, when we feel other than Beloved, or when we can't see the Beloved in others, we need to stop and reflect on what might be standing in the way.

At this current time in our existence when our country and so much of the world is polarized politically and is likely to get worse before it gets better, we are called more than ever to see each other as God's Beloved. Our world almost demands that we take sides and denigrate those that are different, blaming them for the state of the world. As Christians though we are first and foremost Easter people and we need to show the world expressions of love, justice and mercy.

Our life's journey can be tough. Our life journey is a "journey of becoming" as St Augustine says. It is a journey of incarnation that starts with our baptism and continues as God's spirit works in our lives to help us move through self-rejection to a life of acceptance that we are Beloved and ensuring we pass this gift on to others. Henri Nouwen says "the greatest gift my friendship can give you is the gift of your Belovedness." May it be so.