

Sermon for the Baptism of Christ, January 8, 2023

I think that when many of us imagine God, Psalm 29, that we read today, kind of hits off our thoughts. A God of glory and strength, holy and beautiful, thundering on the waters, God's voice a powerful voice, a voice of splendour. God can make the mountains skip like young calves – a pleasing image, if you've ever seen calves let out of the barn on a nice spring day, bouncing all over. God can get the mountains doing that. He can bring flames and lightning, earthquakes, floods and wild winds. Everyone sitting around his throne crying, "Glory!"

It's a bit of a terrifying image, really. But I think it's one many of us have. Even our insurance companies call these terrifying natural forces "acts of God." And it's kind of natural that we should do that. We know God is much greater than we are, and we know these natural forces are much greater and it's easy to put them together. And when the prophets prophesied about the coming Messiah, they often pictured him as a very strong warrior, strengthened by God to wipe out everyone who opposed them and re-establish the Kingdom of Israel by armed force, and establish God's rule over everyone, a bit like a hurricane. Which isn't too surprising when you think that they were an oppressed people and would naturally hope for a Messiah to free them from their oppressors.

And yet, our faith gives us another image entirely of God. We Christians believe that Jesus was God incarnate. That Jesus is fully Divine and also fully human, and that sets us apart from other religions, even those closest to us like Judaism and Islam. We believe that Jesus is the face of God for us, translated into terms we can understand, into human terms. That if we want to know what God is like, we can look at Jesus. And today we have that glorious image of Jesus being baptised and the voice of God speaking from heaven and saying, "This is my beloved Son. I am well pleased with him."

When we think about what God is like, we need to think about what Jesus was like when he was here with us, because Jesus is our clearest image of God. There is no separation between the "Old Testament God" and the "New Testament God." There is only one God, a God who is often misunderstood and maybe misrepresented, but who manages to break through our understanding and images and show us what he is really like.

When Jesus started his ministry, after spending a 40-day prayer retreat in the desert trying to figure out what it meant to be Son of God, the Scripture passages he chose to quote about himself mostly didn't come from the glorious Messiah passages. He chose passages from Isaiah, and especially from what is known as the Servant Songs in the second part of Isaiah. We read the first one today, from Isaiah 42, and the others are in chapters 49, 50 and 52, if you want to look them up.

The Servant is this mysterious figure who appears in Isaiah's prophecies as the one who will bring justice and peace, who will bring the Spirit, who will shed light on Israel and the Gentiles. God says it is too small a thing that he will save Israel. He will also bring salvation to everyone, to the ends of the earth. He will open the eyes of the blind, free the prisoners from the dungeon and bring people out of darkness.

And he will do it quietly, gently, without so much as putting out a guttering candle or breaking an already bruised reed. In the later Servant Songs, he's also the one we read about on Good Friday, who bears our transgressions and is wounded for our healing and dies for our life. The Jewish scholars didn't really know how to understand the Servant and it never occurred to anyone to put him together with the Messiah, but Jesus did that.

And this is how Jesus lived and died among us. He had power, the power of God. That showed in the authority he spoke with. But he used it only to heal, not to wound. He used it to still the storm, not to stir up the storm. He used it to forgive, not to condemn, to include people, not exclude them.

In today's reading from Acts, we have Peter talking to Cornelius, the Roman Centurion who sends for him because of a vision, and Peter goes with him because of a vision he has, and as Peter speaks, the Holy Spirit falls on them and then Peter has them all baptised. Romans. Gentiles. Unbelievers. People that no good Jew would associate with. God chooses them, sends them his apostle, gives them his Holy Spirit and Peter says, "Right!" and includes them in the church by baptism. Took him a while, but he got it.

We're in the season of Epiphany now. Epiphany is January 6, the date when we celebrate the Wise Men coming to see Jesus and worship him. They represent the Gentiles, the non-Jewish people who nevertheless recognised Jesus and brought him gifts. Always good to remember that people who are "outsiders" come bearing gifts. And so this day is seen as the beginning of Jesus shining his light in the wider world. That's what Epiphany means, by the way: it's Greek for shining out. And you'll see in the next few weeks, until Lent, that there are lots of readings about shining light and getting a clearer sense of who God is and how God behaves in the world.

Starting with Jesus' baptism. When Jesus is baptised, submitting himself to a rite that Christians have used ever since, God's Spirit came upon him like a dove and perched on him, stayed on him. And God's voice claimed him as his Son, his beloved Son with whom he was well pleased.

From the very beginning, the church has used baptism as the way to join the church. At the end of Matthew, Jesus tells them to go and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, at the very beginning, 3000 believers were added to the church and they were all baptised. Almost every Christian church ever since has used baptism as the entry to the church.

When we are baptised, a couple things happen. We also receive the Spirit, as Jesus did. And we are joined to Christ, and to Christ's Body the church. We become members of the church of Christ, with everything that entails. And, we are adopted by God as God's children. Just as God's voice claimed Jesus as his son in his baptism, so God claims us as God's children in our baptism. We become, in a very real way, another incarnation of God in the world. A real but imperfect way. Jesus is the full, perfect, revelation of who God was, but in being adopted as God's children and filled with God's Spirit and joined to Christ, the Son

of God, we also become incarnations of God. Imperfect, incomplete ones, but incarnations nonetheless. Think about that.

And that's really our calling in the world, to be God's love here. Like Jesus, we probably need to spend some time thinking and praying about exactly what that means for us in practical terms. In general terms it means the same thing it meant for Jesus, bringing justice and healing and light and forgiveness and inclusion and blessing to the people we meet. But how that specifically plays out for us is going to depend a lot on our strengths and weaknesses, our talents, our interests and that elusive thing, our calling.

You know, sometimes it's hard to figure out our calling, but sometimes it's pretty easy. Here's an example many of you will relate to because I know many of you have followed this calling. Your Mom or Dad, your sister or brother, your spouse, your good friend, suddenly gets sick and needs care and no one else can do it. What is your calling? It's to care for your family member. Which is our way of bringing healing since most of us haven't been given the gift of miraculous healing power. But we're doing the healing work of Jesus in the world when we care for our sick relatives or friends.

Some people tend to speak of a calling or a vocation as something that only applies to clergy, but that's not true. Every single Christian person (and probably everyone else, too), has a calling from God. A way that we can join in to the work of God to bring justice, healing, light, peace and love to the world. And often that work is done very quietly, like the Servant's work. No fanfare, no trumpets sounding. Half the time no one even knows what the person has done until they die and their family starts telling stories.

I think of Fay Armsworthy, whose funeral we had this fall. She loved to bake and all the neighbourhood kids would come by for samples especially samples of her icing. A way of spreading love. I think of Vic, whose funeral is this week. He would quietly go about the work of fixing things around the church. One day you'd show up and something was fixed. Just quietly, no fanfare. Things were just looked after. I think of Kathy Melvin, who quietly send cards to baptism families for years.

Most of us don't tend to think of these sorts of things as our calling from God, but they are. And almost always something you're glad you have a chance to do, even if it's not always enjoyable at the time. Someone told me the other day that she looked after her Mom during her last year when she was really sick. I don't imagine that was always enjoyable, but she said she wouldn't trade that year for anything. It was precious to her, being able to spend that time. When we're doing what is our calling, it brings us deep joy and satisfaction, as well as bringing peace and healing and light and love into our small part of the world.

We each have our own talents and our own callings and they'll be different, because there are so many needs in the world, and we're different. But if you look at them, you'll see that they tie in with what Jesus was called to do: bringing light and love and peace and forgiveness and healing to those around us, each in our own way. And because we are children of God, joined to Christ in baptism, filled with the Spirit of God, the Spirit of God

will lead us and empower us to do these things. That's just what God does in the world, as we see in Jesus his Son. That's what God calls us, his other children, to do in the world. May we be empowered by the Spirit and filled with joy as we, like Jesus, follow our baptismal calling to incarnate God right where we are.