

First Epiphany B 2021
The Baptism of Our Lord

Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Mark 1:4-11

Amid the flood of images
I can't wipe off my mental screen,
The images we all keep talking about,
One is haunting me:
The gallows.
I don't know what the mob would have done,
If given a chance.
Perhaps none of those who took their pictures
Standing on the gallows,
Flags in hand,
Know what they would have done,
If given a chance.
But symbols have meaning,
And the image haunts me.

In the days, and weeks,
Yes, and years to come,
We will grapple as a nation
With what happened this past week,
When armed insurrectionists
Stormed our nation's Capitol
And swarmed inside.

Where do we go from here?
There are political calculations and responses,
And there are philosophical inquiries and responses,
And economic considerations and responses,
And social norms and responses.
All of them will fall short.
And yet we have to think, and feel,
And act.
A cataclysm shook us to our core,
And the implications are still unfolding.
Our responsibilities, so far,
Are unclear.
The course of action,
The way forward,
Is unclear.

I have some convictions,
And some feelings,
Some hopes and fears,
As do many of you.
There is a time and place to share those.
There is a time and a place to act.
I believe that people of faith
Are called to be engaged and active in the world,
To be to be just as engaged in the hard work of truth-telling,
And reckoning,
As we are in the works that can only come after,
The works that cannot be rushed:
Forgiveness, reconciliation, renewal.

This moment, though,
At worship together,
Is a time to reflect
On the wisdom of our tradition
And the promise of the beyond.

We gather this morning
As a community of faith,
Formed by engagement with scripture,
Nurtured by worship –
Even, by grace, nurtured by virtual worship without the sacraments.
We are sustained by prayer,
Inspired by the quest for justice.

And so, the question for us this morning
Is a question of faith.
What is the wondering stance,
What are the core values,
What are the foundational beliefs
That we bring to our faith response?

We will act, some of us,
In the political sphere.
We will engage, some of us,
In our social settings.
And because we are formed by our faith,
We will, whether we understand it or not,
Whether we articulate it or not,
Be shaped by our faith tradition and formation
As we respond to the cataclysm
That has engulfed us.

So – what might our response be,
As people of faith –
As Christians,
Individually and in community?
What faith stance might undergird, and inform,
Our social interactions
And political engagement?
To be blunt –
What difference does our faith make,
When we confront the crisis of the times?

There is no better place to begin
Than with the gospel story
We are given for today.

Here is the essence of the story:
Jesus enters the waters of baptism,
And when he comes up out of the water,
He hears the voice of God.
You are my beloved.
With you I am well pleased.

This is a message with the power to change the world.
Because this message is for Jesus,
It is for us.
The power of Jesus
Is not that he is different or better than us,
But that he is one of us,
One with us.

So the message he hears is for you,
For me,
For us all together,
And for every person on the planet.
Everyone.

We are loved.
We are acceptable.
We are welcomed.

We may be slackers,
We may be stubborn,
We may be misguided
Or even violent and cruel.
We may think of ourselves,

As the old Prayer Book says,
As miserable offenders,
And the message is still for us –
For me, for you.
For them.

You are loved.
You are acceptable,
Right now.
Jesus heard this,
And believed it,
Accepted it, heart and mind, body and soul.
That's what makes him who he is.
If we could hear it,
Believe it, and accept it,
We would become ourselves.

Is that possible?

This past week,
Even before the terrifying and disheartening assault
On the symbolic heart of our democratic republic,
As I began to wonder about the gospel for today,
And how it might be the good news for us now,
I was trying to practice a discipline,
An act of spiritual imagination.

Every time I saw a picture,
Or read an article,
Or had a conversation,
That made me frustrated, or angry,
Or tempted me to despair,
I tried to imagine the person whom I was tempted to revile –
President, or senator, congressperson,
Insurrectionist,
Or – friend, family member,
Companion –
I tried to imagine that person
At the center of one of the classic pictures
Of Jesus' baptism.

Standing in the water,
Seeing the heavens torn apart,
Hearing the voice from heaven.
You are loved.
You are acceptable,

Just the way you are.

And I tried to imagine
That the person standing in the water
Could not only see and hear,
But accept, believe,
Trust, integrate,
The truth of the message.
You are loved.
You are acceptable, and welcome.

How would that change the world?
How would that set us all free?

Look what it did for Jesus.

Who was Jesus,
At the moment of his baptism?
There are so many possible responses,
Some orthodox,
Some less so.
Some close us off to wondering,
Some set us free.

Maybe you are someone who believes
That Jesus came down from heaven,
God in human person,
And that one of the gifts that never left him,
In that act of letting go,
Was the full and sufficient knowledge
That he was loved,
And well pleasing,
Maybe you believe that Jesus knew all along
That he was one with the maker of all things,
the one who speaks light into being,
and brings forth all life.

Or maybe you believe
That Jesus was a good, prayerful, brilliant, but ordinary guy
Who woke up with his feet in the water,
Whose extraordinary gift
Was the grace to see the heavens torn apart,
Hear the voice of God,
And in that very moment, accept, believe,
Trust, and integrate that message.
Maybe you believe

That's what makes him able to understand
That he is God's child,
The beloved.

Some of us believe one way,
Others another.
Some of us don't think about it much.
For some of us,
It's important to believe the right way,
And to believe that others believe the right way.
For others,
It's important to believe
That it's alright to wonder,
To doubt,
To try out different ideas.
We all belong.

All of us
Could use some more time
Under the beam of light
That brings the message
That will change the world,
When we can hear it.
You are loved.
Just as you are.

I invite you,
In the perilous days to come,
As you search for your way forward,
As you wonder what your call might be,
As you accept your responsibilities –
Because we all have responsibilities
If we are to preserve what we have shared,
And share it more equitably with all –
I invite you, before you act,
To reflect.
I invite you, after you act,
To reflect,
To think on this:

Have I acted as one of God's beloved?
Have I taken action
In the full knowledge
That I am already
Acceptable and welcome?

As I wonder about my own actions,
I try to imagine
Those I revile and condemn
Opening their hearts to the message of love.
I try to believe, to trust
That even for the most broken among us,
The heavens are always opening.

There is no avoiding the reckoning and truth telling
That must happen.
But how it happens
Can be shaped by the voice of love.
The voice of love is a voice of truth,
A voice of justice.
But there is no hatred in the voice.
Love, after all, is love.
And love is love for everyone.
Try, if you will, to hold that image,
The image of the most broken and cruel among us
Standing, feet in the water,
The heavens parting overhead,
And a voice saying,
You are loved.
That does not change the past.
But it could change the future.

Even for the most broken among us,
The voice from heaven is always sounding –
You are loved.

Over the crowds swirling around the gallows,
Over the men and women in blue,
Over the frightened lawmakers crouched under their desks,
Over all of us,
Watching and waiting to see what happens next,
The heavens are parting and the voice is speaking clearly.

The broken among us –
And that is all of us –
Cannot always hear that voice.
The broken among us –
And that could be any of us –
Who have acted in bad faith,
Must be censured,
Restrained,
Convicted and kept from doing further harm.

I do not believe that we will ever agree
About who has acted in bad faith,
Or what the consequences should be,
Or even what the way forward will look like.
I do believe
We all belong,
Here, together,
Wondering about the questions.

And more important,
I believe it is up to us
As people of faith,
To remember
That the heavens are always parting,
The voice is always calling.
It is up to us to remember,
Anyone could and can be transformed
By the voice from heaven.
Jesus shows us the way
To that transformation.

For me,
That uncomfortable, unwelcome knowledge,
In better moments,
Opens the gates of compassion.
That changes nothing
About my political opinions,
Or my social interactions,
Or my philosophical musings.

Or perhaps it changes everything.
It makes me less certain;
It makes me more heartbroken,
It makes me more hopeful.

More than anything,
It turns me back to that moment
On the banks of Jordan river,
Where the message of love,
Once and for all,
Cleared the way
For a new beginning,
A way that is open for all.