

ORGANIC JESUS

Sermon preached by the Rev. Sarah Segal McCaslin

January 10, 2010

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

In the blink of an eye, or so it seems, Christmas is over and the New Year come and gone. The baby is out of the manger; the Word made flesh; the Magi headed out of town by another route. According to our liturgical calendar, we are still in the short season of Epiphany, which translates literally as ‘to appear’ and ‘to make known,’ and we are invited to pause here for a quick moment and ponder how God appears to us and the mysteries God makes known to us. What a different place we are in from Advent! The anticipation gives way to fulfillment and the revelation of the good news of a God who loves us so dearly as to join us in the world. The holding of the breath gives way to a deep sigh and the breathing in deeply of the life-sustaining breath of God. The frenzy of holiday revelry gives way to quieter contemplation and reflection. If this isn’t quite so true of our daily lives, hopefully it can be true of our spiritual lives.

In the church calendar, today is known as Baptism of the Lord Sunday, the day when we hear the story of Jesus’ baptism. Today is also the day when we are celebrating the launch of First Forward, the new ministry to members and visitors in their 20s and 30s. In a few minutes, you will have an opportunity to hear from Amy and Will Elkins, co-chairs of First Forward, who will tell you more about the purpose and plans for this group. They, along with an exciting group of new leadership, have worked diligently over the past few months, brainstorming and discerning and planning, taking their time to be both thoughtful and strategic.

Ushering you to your seats today, participating in worship, serving you coffee, these dedicated individuals want to share the fruits of their labor with you. While the mission of the group may be targeted within a certain generation, they do not consider themselves apart from the congregation. It is their love for this church that has inspired them to create a plan of welcome for the many visitors and new members who cross the threshold of this church every week.

I think it is especially appropriate that we celebrate the birth of a new ministry on this day, when we remember the moment when Jesus was empowered by the Holy Spirit to begin his ministry.

While Matthew, Mark and Luke each tell this story, in Luke’s version, we aren’t told where Jesus is baptized. We aren’t told who baptized him. The tradition that Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by John comes from the other gospels. Luke’s main interest is not the baptism, but what takes place after the baptism.

In a dramatic moment shared among all three versions of the story, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in bodily form, like a dove, and a voice from Heaven proclaims, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” This is where Luke wants the readers to take up residence- in the moment of the Spirit’s appearance and God’s proclamation. As Luke tells it, John’s baptism by water is life transforming and calls persons to life. But, something more lies ahead for those who take the first steps in belonging to God’s coming realm. For Jesus, this

occurs in the moment when the Holy Spirit descends to commission and empower him for his ministry, and God is there to bless it.

The emphasis in Luke is on the outcome of baptism rather than the event. The presence of the Holy Spirit, and the image of fire, in the story also shares similarities with the account of Pentecost in the Book of Acts, when the Spirit descends like a mighty rush of wind, and in tongues of fire, anointing the gathered crowd.

The imagery is lush and dramatic- rushing water, raging fire, mighty wind- the primordial elements that often signal destruction transformed as a means of bringing forth life. It makes our practice of baptism seem so... tame and mild-mannered in comparison. Baptism by water, fire, and wind, sounds so much more exciting, so much more dangerous, so much more exhilarating!

According to Sally Brown, professor at Austin Theological Seminary, there is a danger that the sacrament of [Baptism] become too mild-mannered and sentimentalized. If we aren't careful, she says, baptism becomes less about the sacrament and more about the antique christening gown, and the family who come in town for the occasion, and the catered brunch that follows. In Brown's words, "There is a rigor in the sacraments... Jesus promised his followers that they would be baptized with his baptism and would drink his cup, a promise underscored at his final supper with them..."

"I am not out to trash the sense of [community] that develops around the [baptismal font]," Brown continues, "But, peering into a couple of inches of water in a lovely silver font instead of stepping into a powerful river current, we can quickly lose sight of something the ancients knew well: water can save your life but it can also take your life."¹

I'm not sure it would be helpful theology to begin baptizing in the icy waters of New York Harbor to draw attention to the sacrament's rigor. And it probably would not be constructive to tell people in our pre-Baptism classes that Baptism is dangerous, or life-threatening, because in fact, that isn't the case. In the promises of baptism, we are called into new life; we are retrieved from the brink of death and reborn to an unending life lived with God that began before our birth and extends beyond our death. Yet, it is true that in the promises of baptism, we are set upon the path of Christ- a path that (more often than not) leads against the order of the world and refuses to compromise when justice or love is at stake. "There is rigor in the sacraments..." and we do well to take it seriously.

Last August, Donny, Claire and I took a trip to Santa Cruz, California, to introduce Claire to her McCaslin family. Conveniently for us, the entire family stills lives within a few miles of one another, and we spent our days traveling up and down the same, main avenue, strapping Claire into her car seat, enjoying our freedom from the tyranny of the subway and feeling very... suburban.

One afternoon, I glanced out of the window and noticed a small church, a quaint, modern building, unassuming and pleasant. By the side of the road stood a huge welcome sign for the church with the words, "Organic Jesus," printed underneath the name of the congregation. We drove by so fast, I was sure I had misread, but later that day, we passed it again. Sure enough, the sign read, "Organic Jesus." Well, this is Santa Cruz, after all; the birthplace of the New Age

movement, as Donny likes to say, with plenty of health food stores and vegetarian restaurants. But, still... “Organic Jesus”?

I did a little research and discovered that Organic Jesus is the name of a curriculum for small group study- targeting people who are new to Christianity. The intent, from what I can gather, is to strip away everything that is artificial or enhanced about Christianity, leaving only that which is most pure and perfect, Organic.

I appreciate the use of new and creative methods in church evangelism to reach out to people who have been harmed by or turned off to the church, but there is a risk that attempting to strip away will have the opposite effect of watering down or reducing Christianity past recognition. A lot of what I am reading on-line about new church developments involves simplifying the Christian endeavor to making Jesus your best friend and personal savior. Granted, much of this comes from more theologically conservative congregations, but not completely.

The superficiality of some of the Christian marketing I’ve seen cannot sustain a soul through a lifetime, especially a lifetime that will invariably include deep loss and inexplicable tragedy. Life and God and salvation cannot be calculated in simple equations. Who of us can calculate a lifetime’s worth of faith and doubt in such a way?

Jesus is not TRENDY. The Church is not a social club. And there is rigor in the sacraments.

I am capable of self-critique and realize the potential for veering off in the direction of liberal intellectual elitism. And I also don’t want to be a killjoy. I believe the church is a great place to nurture friendships, to find romance, to enjoy life and have fun. The church has a responsibility to reach out to those who have been harmed or ignored by church politics and exclusion. Jesus can be our best friend, and he is a personal savior to many. And the church is a great place to be when the winds of the Spirit blow upon us, calling us to our vocations as disciples.

The mark of baptism is invisible to the naked eye. The cross drawn in water upon the forehead fades almost as soon as it is made. The water upon the forehead is not a magical talisman to protect us from hurt; it does not foreordain a life lived in all purity and sinlessness. The waters of baptism do not initiate the baptized in to an exclusive club. In baptism, we are claimed by God. For everyone, in the moment of baptism or maybe even simply a moment of quietly professed faith, the Spirit descends and the voice of God proclaims, “This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.” We are not beloved because we are baptized. We are beloved because we belong to God.

There is a mystery and opaqueness in the Gospel stories of Jesus’ baptism. No one can quite agree what it means to be baptized by the Holy Spirit and fire. Historical context and theological speculation abound, yet, in a way I find comforting, the sacrament continues to mystify. Who’s to say that we can’t experience baptism by the Holy Spirit and fire, even if we have not received baptism by water? Who can predict when and how the Holy Spirit descends upon us, calling us into a life of discipleship? Most, if not all, of us have experienced a ‘baptism

by fire,' a time when we are thrown into a difficult situation for which we are only marginally prepared. I bet that's how the apostles were feeling on the day of Pentecost. There was no new member class yet, no rules and regulations to guide them, no preexisting communities to emulate.

In the opening chapter on worship in the Presbyterian Book of Order, we hear this about the movement of the Spirit:

The Spirit of God quickens people to an awareness of God's grace and claim upon their lives. The Spirit moves them to respond by naming and calling upon God, by remembering and proclaiming God's acts of self-revelations in word and deed, and by committing their lives to God's reign in the world. (BOO

W-1.1002)

When the Spirit descends, we are moved to respond. Baptism reminds us of God's claim and prepares us for the inevitable appearance of the Spirit, the inevitable appearance of rushing waters, mighty winds, and raging fires. And lest we forget the words of the prophet Isaiah, if we begin to tremble at the cost of choosing to move against the world's current. Listen: "I have called you by name," says the Lord, "you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord, your God... Do not fear."

The leadership of First Forward has not worked this hard to form a new ministry for the sake of streamlining their monthly brunches. They have not devoted countless hours implementing this new program for the increase of their already packed social lives. They are deepening their commitment to this church, and to their faith, by creating a new model for reaching out to the hundreds of young adults who walk through these doors each year. The leadership of First Forward is stepping firmly into the powerful current of the baptismal waters, well aware that they could be easily swept away. They have been anointed by the Holy Spirit, baptized with fire, empowered to fulfill the ministry to which God calls them.

I hope the church welcomes their efforts. And I hope you see their progress as a challenge to do likewise. Find your niche, and if you can't find one, create it! We aren't about forming cliques, and we aren't about becoming a 'small group' church where members are segregated by age, profession or interest. We are about the business of encouraging the formation of a community, and that community begins with a relationship between two people, not one person and an entire congregation. We are about the business of creating disciples, about passing out life vests and whistles to those about to jump headfirst into the rushing waters. Thus says the Lord, "I have called you by name, you are mine." Thus says the Lord, "This is my child, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

If you are waiting for the moment of your anointing, waiting for the church's permission to function as a disciple- the moment is now and permission granted! And let this be your commissioning: You are God's beloved, in you, God is well-pleased. Do not fear, for God is with you. Go now in peace, out into the world, to love and serve God. Amen.

¹ Sally Brown, "Water, Wine, Word." *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary*, Fall 2009.