

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Second Sunday After The Epiphany
15 January 2017

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalms 40:1-12

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42

You may be very much aware that the text we read this morning is certainly an argument in the Roman Church for the pope being the successor of Peter. If you ever attend a liturgy at the Vatican, you won't get a couple sheets of paper; you'll get a book. And when the pope speaks, the pope says "*Peter says.*" You know the etymology behind the word *Peter*. It's the same as *petroleum*, oil that comes from rock.

So here we are, faced with John the Baptizer who is saying things about Jesus that he wants clearly understood, and he wants to make sure that no mistake is made about **him**. He's got a great following and he could easily have a swollen ego. But he says, "*No, not me. The one that is the Savior of the World is one who comes after me who existed before me.*" What kind of talk is that? Well, that's the kind of stuff we get when we get to the creed. "*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made...*" So there's this confession being made in the creed about Jesus as existing but not being created at the time of his birth but having an existence before that - "*Of one being with the Father.*" And then the big argument that comes in the third article of the creed: "*We believe in the Holy Spirit...who proceeds from the Father*" and in our tradition, "*who proceeds from the Father and the Son.*" The point being made comes from this part of John, I'm sure, that the Word of God existed before Jesus and that Jesus **is** the Word of God. In these sort of philosophical understandings the early Church is trying to figure out who in the world Jesus is and what his importance is to us as people. And here's John with a large following - I think he had a church in Dickson City somewhere. [Laughter] He's sort of shrugging his shoulders and saying, "*Now wait a minute. I'm not the center of this. God is, and if you want to see God in person, here is the man of God, here is Jesus, here is the incarnation of God who takes away the sins of the world. This is he of whom I said 'after me comes one who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'*" All of this theological, philosophical attempt to understand who in the world is Jesus.

And the stuff that I don't quite understand. He says, "*I myself did not know him.*" Well, didn't we encounter Elizabeth and Mary greeting each other when they were pregnant? And don't we call John Jesus' cousin? And isn't there a lot of Renaissance art, particularly by Raphael, of Jesus and John the Baptizer as infants, undressed of course, at the feet of Mary. There's all kinds of confusing stuff and it gets even more confusing. They want to know where Jesus is staying and it's four o'clock in the afternoon. Why does anybody bother to record that time? I don't get it.

From the congregation: "It's tea time!" [Laughter]

That's it! It's tea time! That may be the importance of it. Maybe what they're saying is they broke bread. They had something to eat and something to drink. As you know, culticly for us, liturgically for us, having something to eat and drink is central to what we do here. After we deal with the Word of God as it is written and read and heard and believed to be embodied, then we come to the embodiment of the Word in the sacrament. So I think you may be right on target!

And then we get this clear delineation of the difference between the baptism of John which is a baptism for the repentance of sins with water and the baptism of Jesus which implies the Holy Spirit.

I don't know about you, but I was certainly astounded with the words in the psalm today. Did they move you? I found them completely surprising because these are words that are ancient and pre-Christian - hundreds, maybe even thousands of years before Jesus. Who knows? The psalmist says, "*Great things are they that you have done, O Lord my God! How great your words and your plans for us! There is none who can be compared with you.*" That's kind of what John is saying: "*There is none who can be compared with Jesus. He is the Lamb. Don't look at me even though my church is big and I have a big following and people think what I say is*

important. The importance has to do with Jesus and not with me.”

And then the psalmist goes on to say... Now you have to remember how shocking these words must have been...shocking and utterly radical - *“In sacrifice and offering you take no pleasure...Burnt-offering and sin-offering you have not required, and so I said, Behold, I come...I love to do your will. Your law is in my heart, not in what I wear, not in what I eat, not in what I burn, not in what I slaughter, but I have a relationship with God which is based on love. It is a personal relationship. It has nothing to do with a contract.”*

Long before Jesus there was a religious idea that was completely radical and subversive of the religious institution, and here we see it in the psalm. And then we see it again in Jesus and his life. John sees it and points to Jesus as where true religion is to be found and where the Word of God is to be not only heard but seen in the person of Jesus. The only time we have a record of Jesus really being angry is when he overturns the tables in the temple. I think we must be careful about not seeing that as a violent act but as an angry act at the refusal of the religious institution to understand the truth of God’s love for all people. The money-changers were there so that the right animals could be exchanged for the right kind of money. It had to be temple money. It had to be the right kind of animal for the wrong kind of sin to be slaughtered for God to be happy and your sins to be washed away and forgiven. It’s all this - we know the rules. This is what you have to do - pay up or go to hell. Pay up or God will be angry with you. Buy this, do this, wear that, eat this. And Jesus says that has nothing to do with religion at all. And the psalmist figured that out too, long before Jesus!

“I love to do your will, O my God; your law is deep in my heart,” says the psalmist. *“I proclaimed righteousness in the great congregation; behold, I did not restrain my lips; and that, O Lord, you know.”* The psalmist is saying, *“I spoke the truth. I spoke the truth to the power of the Church, and it was about righteousness.”* It had something to do with righteousness not being for sale, not being controlled by a religious organization or a religious idea, for that matter. *“Your righteousness have I not hidden in my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your deliverance; I have proclaimed the truth of your love to others; I have not concealed your love and faithfulness from the great congregation,”* which I suppose is anything larger than a bunch of people at worship.

“You are the Lord; do not withhold your compassion from me.” Compassion is not ever a part of a contract. You cannot legislate love. You cannot legislate compassion. Compassion comes from an understanding, loving relationship. You can’t buy it. You can’t legislate it, You can’t demand it. You can only give it, receive it and share it. *“Do not withhold your compassion from me; let your love and your faithfulness keep me safe forever.”* This is astounding religious radicalism way long before Jesus ever gets around to saying it, repeating it, proclaiming it, and sharing it. And it is **still**, my dear friends, a radical message. People do not want to hear this.

We, all of us, as political and religious and social beings wish to be right. We want to be righteous. That’s pretty normal, isn’t it. I don’t walk around wanting to be wrong although sometimes I suppose I am. You would tell me if I were. [laughter] Or you’d try to anyway. We want to be right and we want to be right with God. Thank goodness! But then there is that part of us that wants to say, *“Because I perceive myself to be right with God, I therefore have the power to perceive whether or not you are.”* And that’s where we start to get in trouble, isn’t it? That’s where we say, *“I’ve got it right and you have got it wrong.”* So we fight about things like *“proceeds from the Father”* or *“proceeds from the Father and the Son.”* And then we proceed to hate each other about that and kill each other over that and call ourselves religious for doing so.

John says, *“Behold the Lamb of God.”* True religion has something more to do with what Jesus is doing than with what I am doing. *“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”* Now that can get on my nerves too. There is this idea that God Almighty needed a sacrifice for our sins because that was an old religious idea. And you know what happens with old religious ideas - they die hard. There was this understanding that the only way to make God happy about us because we were sinners was to sacrifice things and burn things so that God would smell them and that would make God happy and then God would forgive our sins because we sacrificed the right animals, burned the right incense, said the right prayers, wore the right clothing, washed our pots the right way, didn’t eat pig meat. You get it. All of this stuff to jollificate God

Almighty who might not need jollification. But that old religious idea dies hard, and so people hatched this extraordinarily cockamammy idea that God the Creator of the world sent his own Son so he has somebody to sacrifice for your sins and mine. Now tell me, friends, is that not nuts?! And where is that idea based? It's based in a religion that understands itself as a contract. You owe God something, and then God owes **you** something.

Well, get this from me personally. In my humble estimation, which as you know perhaps at this point, is neither humble nor an estimation - there's nothing you can do to make God happy. And I firmly believe Almighty God spends all of her time attempting to convince us to believe that we are fully, entirely and completely and sufficiently loved by God so that our sins count for nothing, and nobody has to be killed to do that. Nothing has to be killed to do that. Nothing has to be burned to do that. Nothing has to be said to do that. God does that for us because God loves us with the love of a parent that I cannot imagine. You've heard it said, "*That's a face only a mother could love.*" Well, I think the foundation of our faith is we are sinners only a God could love. And we believe, teach and confess that God, in fact, loves us fully, completely and sufficiently (comma) and everybody else in the world fully, completely, sufficiently without our having to do a thing. That love is there simply for us to believe and accept and enjoy.

Sometimes that takes time. Have you ever heard anybody reminisce about a loving parent and say, "*I wish I had.. or I remember when...or I didn't get it then but I get it now.*" And here we are. So you might ask the question and I would hope you would: Why, then, did Jesus have to die? He didn't. Jesus died because religious people, people invested in empire, political people, human people, sinful people - simply couldn't stand what it was he proclaimed. They couldn't take it that he told them God loved them and their enemies. He couldn't live because people couldn't believe that he told them every last person in the world was an undocumented immigrant into creation. They couldn't stand it. It messed up all of the control of empire. It messed up all of the control of religion. It wouldn't build domes in the Vatican nor walls between nations. It was his religion and it infuriated them so much so that they crucified him. It's what's called the gospel and all he did with that was share it. That's all he did: proclaim good news to all people. Well now, if you ask me, the way to test if what we preach is good news may not have to do with seeing whether or not it measures up to what the creed says, but it might have something to do with us having the humility to ask the people with whom we share this news whether or not it is good to them.

Many of you have probably read Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. If you haven't, I recommend it. This Nigerian author talks about the effects of Christian missionaries on African culture, primarily in Nigeria. It's embarrassing beyond description. The suggestion is made that maybe it could either be reversed or shouldn't have happened, but maybe it's an invitation for us as Christians to think about when we share good news to be humble enough to ask whether or not how, when and with whom we share it, it is in fact good news because much of the Christianity that was exported in those times and places to many of those people who I believe could have benefitted from the gospel - how it was communicated was bad news. And that's because we fail to ask those with whom we communicate whether or not the love which we received and which we would share is getting across to them the same way it got across to us. And so we are tempted to use scripture and our theology and our creeds as hammers to beat people over the head and as documents of division rather than vehicles of unity, inclusion, affection and the real gospel of Jesus Christ which is simply that God is love, period - all the time, everywhere, for everyone.

If it is good news for me, I know it is good news for me because I receive it as good news. And if I'm going to share or proclaim what it is I have received, maybe I should think about doing a marketing analysis and see whether or not what it is I share is in fact the product that I intend or have received which is good and only good and never bad, which is inclusive and always inclusive and never bad because it is divine.

It was the pope himself this morning who is celebrating a day of commemorating and remembering the situations and circumstances of immigrants and aliens around the world. He encourages people to encounter the cultures, languages, customs and cultural differences of other people as sources of joy and interest and grace rather than causes of fear and exclusion and hatred.

I've shared this with you before and I know you're not surprised when I say that I disagree with

scripture on this, on the interpretation of the Tower of Babel when different languages were given to people to divide them because their desire was to build a tower high enough to get to the heavens to reach God. I don't buy that. I believe that different cultures, languages, customs, genders, behaviors, clothing, cuisines...all of that was given to us so that we don't die of boredom, so that we have something that is given to us to share with others and we can respect and love and appreciate and accept from others the unique gift that God has given to them. Don't you ever get tired of boiled cabbage and potatoes?

So we are given in the lessons today - and not just from the New Testament lessons; from the pre-Christian lessons as well - this invitation to think about how radical the gospel is. A simple way of testing whether or not the good news is in fact good to those with whom we share it.

Fulton Sheen was in color this morning. He was resplendent in his magenta cape! *[laughter]* He was talking about the experience of the Israelites in Egypt in the pre-Christian scriptures. And he talked about the experience of Christians - particularly the Polish Christians who suffered so terribly during WWII. That became intimately important to me during coffee hour today when Mary Savorski was here. Her dad is a priest in the Polish National Church. You may know that the Vatican of the Polish National Church is in Scranton. She talked about the preservation of that culture and language, customs and so forth. She said a gorgeous thing to me about this place: how much she feels at home here. Don't swell with pride; just believe it. The immigrant experience in the United States is now becoming a challenge. The Polish immigration has changed extraordinarily.

My first parish in West New York, New Jersey, was still worshipping in German when I was ordained there on May 18, 1975, in a neighborhood that was 90-plus percent Hispanic. They said, "*We intend to stay here.*" I said, "*How do you expect to do that?*" They said, "*Spanish ministry.*" I said, "*How do you expect to do that?*" And they said, "*You're going to learn to speak Spanish.*"

Mary talked about Polish congregations attempting to do work in the Spanish language in this part of the world and the tough transition that is for all of us as we look at sharing the gifts of our own cultures and languages and cuisines and couture and all the rest of it. But we need not be afraid of difference. We need to receive it as God's gift to others which they might be willing to share with us if we will share ourselves with them - without the overlay of "*mine's better than yours.*"

And so we have this invitation to share the experience of the Israelites in Egypt, the Polish people in WWII and Fulton Sheen talking about race as an issue in this country. His point was that all of these groups have experienced exclusion, oppression, hatred, murder, diminution, suppression. He said, "*We've all experienced this so shouldn't we help each other.*" It was a place to start. It was interesting to hear Bishop Sheen talk about that being the basis for the ecumenical effort because "*even Protestant ministers were persecuted for their faith during WWII.*" And that from under a beautiful magenta cape! It was moving.

Somebody once said that the Church is more like an ocean-liner than a speedboat. We don't move or turn very quickly, but we can and we must and we should. And I think we are encouraged by St. John when he looks at Jesus to remember that there - not here - **there** is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Here is where we encounter the Word of God in scripture and here is where we see and taste and touch and ingest the Lamb of God who then lives inside of us with this extraordinarily good message for the whole world which yes, friends, is radical and threatening to many but which **is** the gospel!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.