

Keeping our head above water

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the First Sunday after the Epiphany, the Baptism of Christ, January 10, 2016.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you... Isaiah 43:2

Though it may seem an arcane term, Epiphany refers to a revelation and enlightenment. For the church, it refers to the revelation and the manifestation of God in Christ. Rather than being a postscript to Christmas, Epiphany is about revealing the creative and redemptive nature of Christ. This Epiphany season emphasizes the full nature of Christ shining brightly amidst the complexities of the world. In our own growth and formation as Christians, it is a personal epiphany when we take seriously our call to be part of Christ's light in the world.

Just as we have celebrated the birth of Christ and have put away our Christmas decorations, we are transported thirty years in time to when Jesus is ready to embark upon his ministry. There is but one account of him during the hidden years recorded in the gospel of Luke when his parents are searching for him and find him teaching the elders in the temple.

Picture yourself being present at the River Jordan when Jesus presents himself to be baptized. John the Baptist is taken back. He sees no reason why Jesus should undergo such a rite of repentance. Indeed, he thought that Jesus should baptize him. Jesus insists and is immersed in the waters of the Jordan as a way to identify with the human condition. He is setting the example of what he expects of us.

As God's approval of Jesus was given at his baptism, so we were anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit at our own baptism. When we became a member of the community of Christ, we were recognized as one of God's own.

While most of us don't remember our baptism, it was our commissioning to be part of the servant community to serve the world. As the anointed one of God, Jesus gives us a better understanding of what it means to love God and to love and respect our neighbor as we would want to be loved and respected. The power of God was in Christ as he went about teaching and healing. His ministry is a model for us to serve the world in his name wherever we are with the gifts given us.

God became one of us in the person of Jesus Christ. When Jesus waded into the waters of the Jordan he emerged as the visible presence of God's grace. When people saw and heard him, they eagerly pressed in on every side to learn from him and be healed by him. Because so many people needed him he had to withdraw from time to time to renew his spiritual resources while never losing contact with the world about him.

When Helen Keller was left blind and deaf at an early age, she spent her childhood and adolescence frustrated at not being able to make contact with the world around her. Her breakthrough came when her twenty-six year old teacher, Annie Sullivan, took her hand and put it under a water pump and spelled out the word "water" in the palm of her hand. The frustrated young Helen finally made the connection between what she was sensing and what was being communicated to her. That was her personal epiphany as she slowly began the process of becoming aware of her surroundings and the gift of being able to communicate. She learned eagerly and eventually went on to graduate from Radcliffe College to be an inspiration and advocate for others with disabilities.

Water played a part in a personal epiphany for me. As a very young child living on the New Jersey shore, I developed a fear and dread of being in water over my head. For years, my heart would pound whenever I approached the ocean or went to a swimming pool. At some point I had to come to grips with my fear and realized that I just had to plunge in. Swimming is now a part of my regular exercise as a meditative experience that gives me time to think through things. As I emerge from swimming laps, I feel invigorated and spiritually renewed by the water flowing over and around me. The words of the prophet Isaiah in the reading today assure us that God is with us when we pass through the waters and are not overwhelmed.

Water is an essential element of our lives. Before we were born, we were formed in the watery world of our mother's womb. After we emerged into the world at birth, we were washed and cleansed. Later we emerged from the waters of baptism to be reborn into the community of the faith of God in Christ. Whenever we act in Christ's name in the stream of life, we have to be confident in who we are, what we believe and what we can do.

When we are feeling overwhelmed with personal responsibilities, we may feel that it is all we can do to keep our head above water. The author Joan Chittister tells us that contemplative prayer is a means of being totally immersed in the presence of God while in the midst of the many issues swirling around us. Consciousness is being aware of the presence of God, the mind of God, and the will of God working in and through us while immersed in all the challenges that life brings us.

These are the times we need to center ourselves in prayer to contemplate how the mind of God relates to the world. We ask ourselves how Jesus would respond to the events of the world? How would he see the threat of North Korea with a weapon of mass destruction? How would he regard the fluctuations of world economy? How would he respond to the congress and the nation being held hostage to the fears generated by the economic self-interest of the gun lobby? As is often the case, the solutions to some of the greatest dangers lie within.

Baptism is also known as "Christening." It refers to being completely immersed in the mind and person of Christ. Our conscience is informed by being immersed in the life and person of Christ Jesus. When Christ's life becomes our life, we act in his name to be his visible presence standing for compassion, peace and justice.