

The light that never fails

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 8, 2017.

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Matthew 3:13

This church season of Epiphany is from the Greek referring to the manifestation or showing forth of the light of Christ. We have our own personal epiphany when we experience a breakthrough in understanding what we had not been able to comprehend. It is our own epiphany when we come to know how having a personally close relationship with Christ affects our whole being.

In our gospel narrative today, Jesus approaches John the Baptist to be baptized by him. John does not go to Jesus; rather Jesus goes to him. John feels unworthy and protests that he preaches a baptism of repentance and there is no need for Jesus, who is without sin, to undergo a baptism of repentance. Jesus is setting the example for us to repent and turn away from all things sinful that separate us from the love of God. His baptism, therefore, is his way of identifying with the human condition. Jesus is our best example of what it means to be human. He begins his ministry in the same way we begin our life with him. At the heart of the Christian faith is the fact that God became one of us that we might know the full nature of God's redeeming love.

When we take people into our confidence we want them to listen and understand in a non-judgmental way. They are of help if they enable us to see points of view we had not considered. We can't expect them to solve our problems or answer all our questions. We come by our best solutions and answers by drawing our own conclusions. To be able see the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel is a personal epiphany.

I thought of this while on a London underground years ago when the train broke down between stations. We had to climb out the door and down a ladder and help each other find our way in the dark tunnel until we could see the lights at the next station. Finding solutions to complex problems is like that. We find our way through life's mysteries by helping each other work through to the light of understanding.

Whether learning a new language, solving a math problem, learning a new computer program or having to deal with a difficult personality, a personal epiphany happens when the light of understanding is revealed to us. It is like entering a darkened room and groping around until we find the light switch. At the end of the Christmas Eve service when we held our lit candles in the darkened church, there was powerful meaning in the words from the prologue to Saint John's gospel about the light that shines in the darkness that cannot be overcome.

The renowned scientist Dr. Albert Einstein wrote that the most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and true science. I am in awe of the mystery of how nature orchestrates everything from the first bloom of spring to the movement of the stars and planets. There is mystery in how the love between two people contributes toward fulfilling the potential in each other.

Sadly, there is also mystery in why innocent people suffer. History records those who have been victims of war, famine, epidemics and natural disasters. It is one thing to suffer the result of our own wrongdoing and entirely another thing to suffer from causes beyond our control. Human suffering has nothing to do with fairness, nor is it an indication of any lack of God's love for us. While there are no easy answers, the fact is that suffering and loss are part of the natural order.

Benjamin Franklin wrote his own epitaph in which he thought of himself as a first edition of a publication until it goes into a final edition revised and corrected by the Author. As time goes on our story goes through revised editions that never go out of print until the day we present our imperfect selves before God. In the end, what matters is not that we had all the answers,

but that we dealt with the questions. Saint Paul wrote that now we see through a dim mirror, but the time will come when we will come face to face with reality. We only have partial knowledge, but the time will come when we will know fully even as we have been fully known. We are assured that by being immersed with Christ in baptism we are marked as his own forever in a bond that cannot be broken.

The same Spirit that strengthened Jesus at the beginning of his ministry descends upon us to provide the light of understanding and direction in the midst of turmoil and confusion. Just as we were born from our mother's womb and washed, we were immersed in the water of baptism to be born into the new life in Christ. Our initiation into membership in Christ does not take place in a vacuum, but always in the context of the community of faith.

Life makes sense when we can love and be loved. We love others not for what we can get from them but for what we can give to them. To give our heart to someone allows us the vulnerability to risk having our heart broken. All life involves risks. To love and be loved is worth the risk.

It is common practice in many churches to have the large paschal candle lit during a baptisms and funerals. It represents the light of Christ with us at the beginning when we are immersed in the water of baptism and again at the end as we enter the life eternal.

As we enter this New Year there is uneasiness about what the future holds. We expect our leaders to put the best interests of the people before their own and for all of us to bring out the best in each other. We stand against self-indulgent narcissism that lacks moral compass. We resist all forms of racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, xenophobia, demagoguery, misogyny and white male privilege. We must never ignore the least of our brothers and sisters who go without who can be easily forgotten. Selfless sacrifice and service must never become irrelevant. Keep alive the image of the statue in New York harbor with her torch held high to welcome the poor huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Lift high the light of inclusiveness and diversity that has made this nation great. It is my hope and prayer that we will always be a people who stand for compassion, justice and peace.