

Epiphany 1C 2016 Sermon

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

[Much of what I share comes from David Lose's blog, "...In the Meantime..."]

"As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John [the Baptist], whether he might be the Messiah...."

I'm struck by the wondering among the people about whether John the Baptist might be the promised Messiah. It is a recurring theme in the Old Testament and the Apocrypha that when the Israelites were being threatened by hostile forces, they called out to God to send someone to save them – a Messiah. It got me to thinking: "Are you and I still looking for a Messiah?" Or, perhaps more accurately, "Who are **we** looking toward to 'save' us?"

Because here's the thing: I suspect we're almost always hoping to find **someone** to save us. Sometimes the longed-for messiah operates on the national or world stage. Perhaps Hillary or the Donald or some other political candidate who promises to make right whatever we think is wrong about our country. Or maybe we're looking to a sports hero or team that makes us feel like we're a part of something bigger and, to boot, winners. Didn't the legendary Peyton Manning, after all,

come riding into the game on his proverbial white horse – or white Bronco – last week and save the day for our cherished football team, clinching the AFC West Title? How wonderful does it feel to bask in that messianic glory?

Sometimes the longed-for messiah lives closer to home, however. We long for a new **romantic** relationship with some special person so that we'll never feel lonely again. Or maybe we're hoping to be saved by the people we work with or volunteer with, longing for them to tell us how wonderful and indispensable we are. Or perhaps we expect to be saved by our children, as they grow up to fulfill all of our dreams for them (and, truth be told, for ourselves!).

Again, I think that we, like the people our Gospel describes, continue to be filled with expectation, wondering if various persons on the global stage or in our local circle might be the messiah, our savior. Even when they disappoint – and of course, they eventually **all** do – we keep looking with expectation for our personal messiah. Maybe we can't help it; maybe the longing for a messiah is in our DNA.

But here's the question: do we imagine *Jesus* is that Messiah?

Now, I know, I know, of *course* we think Jesus is the Messiah. If not, why would we be in church, right? But do we expect Jesus actually to **save** us – not just in the eternal get-out-of-hell-free-card kind of way, but actually to save us here and now, making a tangible difference in our everyday lives? I'm not so sure we do. Which is kind of a shame, as it seems like the whole point of the incarnation – God taking human flesh – was for God to get involved in our lives, personally and directly.

In today's Gospel, Luke reports that “the heaven was opened” and God spoke directly to Jesus immediately following his baptism. It's a moving and dramatic scene – Jesus emerging from the waters of baptism as the Spirit alights upon him. But I think we sometimes forget the power and symbolism of Jesus' baptism, as God moves from the heavenly realm to encounter Jesus – and, *through* Jesus, to encounter all of **us** – on our own terrain. God removes, that is, all that separates us from God, and meets us where we are.

This is the power of Baptism – that God has opened up the heavens, descended from on high, and come to meet us **where** we are and *as* we are... all in order that we might know that, just as Jesus was told at **his** baptism, **we, too**, are beloved children of God and that God is well pleased with **us** also.

Yes, Jesus **is** our messiah, the one who identified with us, bearing the presence of God into our world tangibly, pouring out his life for us and defeating death through his resurrection. And if we take that seriously, two things occur. First, we don't have to find messiahs all around us. We can support our favorite political candidate or sports team, hope for a good relationship and great colleagues, knowing that we will *not* be saved by these things. Indeed, we will regularly be disappointed by and, truth be told, will disappoint these persons. But they will not *save*. And that's okay, because the Eternal Word, which took flesh in Jesus, has done just that – has come to make us whole.

Second, once we realize that we don't **need** *another* messiah, it *frees us up* to make a huge difference in the world and in the lives of those around us. **We**, after all, *are* those people named by God as beloved children and chosen by God to do wonderful things in the world.

Can you imagine, for a second, if everyone who supported a particular political candidate decided to take responsibility for some aspect of the problems we hope our elected leaders will solve? Or if instead of waiting for that special someone to find us, **we** went out looking to befriend those who are lonely or less fortunate? And what if we simply valued our colleagues or children or neighbors or fellow church members for who they are, not for what they can do for us? I imagine that the world would, in very short order, be a remarkably different place.

On this Sunday that we remember the Baptism of our Lord, perhaps we might remind ourselves that because Jesus came as Son of God and Son of Man, because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, we don't *need* any **other** messiahs. Furthermore, because Jesus came as one of us, **we** are *also* caught up in the power of the creating and redeeming God. **We are**, that is, those people who do not need to save the world but have been called and equipped nonetheless to make a tangible difference in that little corner of the world in which we find

ourselves. We are called to be Christ (“Messiah” in the Hebrew) to one another.

Following worship today, our SWEEPS Council will meet in the Parish Office, in part to consider some practical and tangible ways we might be Christ to others in need in our community; and I encourage each of you to attend that meeting. Mike Smith has condensed some of the ideas which Dee Dee Clements, Director of Loaves and Fishes, shared with us when he and I met with her just before Christmas. Several of these ideas are very doable for us as a parish or as individual parishioners.

One idea, which Mike and I shared with Dee Dee, came from the keynote speaker at our Diocesan Convention in October. It’s a nationwide community movement called Laundry Love, and it simply involves inviting people who are struggling financially to a local laundromat at a specified time once a month where they can wash their clothes for free. It all started 12 years ago in Ventura, California when a homeless gentleman by the name of T-Bone (his real name was Eric) was asked by a member of a local church, “T-Bone, how can we come alongside your life in a way that would matter?” His response was honest and practical. “If I had clean clothes I think people would treat me like a human being.” T-Bone’s desire for worth and welcome is a need we **all** have. We **all** yearn to be treated as human beings. In our baptismal vows, which we will shortly reaffirm, we promise to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our self” and to “respect the dignity of every human being.”

This past Wednesday, I hosted the monthly meeting of the Ministerial Alliance in our Parish Hall. Joe Garkovich, pastor at First Christian Church (where Mercy Today is now located) came early to the meeting and said to me, “I hear you are interested in a laundry ministry. Pastor Sheilah and I have been talking about the need for that...” My friends, this is how Asset-Based Community Development works – pooling our assets in the community to meet a need. This is not a ministry Christ Church would need to do on its own. We could partner with other churches or the local synagogue or a service club. But perhaps this is a community effort that we could take the lead in. The idea is not just to wash people’s clothes, but to

visit with them while they are waiting for their clothes to wash or dry. Play cards. Share some cookies. Play games with the kids. *Get to know our neighbors.* And in the process, we, too, will be transformed more and more into the image of Christ. Pastor Garkovich told the Ministerial Alliance on Wednesday that since First Christian started hosting Mercy Today about 2 years ago, his congregation has been changed – made more compassionate, more aware, more loving, more empathetic. And Joe and Sheilah are talking about the possibility of serving **two** free meals a week, if they can get volunteer help from other churches and organizations. That's what being the Body of Christ – being Christ to one another – is all about.

And perhaps as we live out our lives as the Body of Christ in this community, others will react as the crowds did to John the Baptist, wondering if one of us is the Messiah, because they have seen Christ (Messiah in the Hebrew) in us. It is what we are called by our Baptism to be.

AMEN