

Epiphany I Year B 2012

“as he was coming out of the water he saw the heavens torn apart”

I have babies on my mind right now....one in particular of course, Elliott, whom we have just visited in Austin for a week, our very first grandchild...and she is beautiful, I must admit, first baby I've met that didn't look like Winston Churchill...and since we've been home coincidentally we've been surprised at seeing babies everywhere, swaddled and being carried in the latest high-tech carrier or car seat...there's all this new stuff now to buy since Katharine and I had our babies....I've also been reminded of how utterly dependent upon us babies are...how vulnerable.... how open...and how it's all about the baby....I'll admit, for the most part along the way I thought it was all about me.... that was a long time ago.... but I have been reminded yet again that it is about this vulnerable child among us...this new life forever being born that has to be nurtured, nurtured into I dare say, into the *imago Dei*, the image of God.....because that's who we are...we are the image of God as the faithful.... Created by God so God can actually get a glimpse of Godself, a glimpse of what God looks like in the world God made.....I heard just a few days ago a writer interviewed on NPR that said he writes in order to know himself...and sometimes what he writes is a revelation he (the writer) never dreamed of....a surprise as to his own identity....perhaps a parallel here.

I've also thought about our granddaughter Elliott's baptism that I will perform at some point, and that has caused me to think a lot lately about baptism in general.....In the early church baptism took place at the Easter Vigil...hundreds, perhaps thousands of candidates who had been fasting and studying for weeks, perhaps months, in some cases years preparing for this life changing event...this initiation into a second life...the first life being about our own maturing nurture and then the second life into which we are initiated wherein we live a life not for ourselves but for the good of the whole, and that is a life of risk and imagination and improvisation, being open to the infinite possibilities of the good that wait with bated breath to be unleashed. It is not for the faint of heart, this baptismal life....In the early church individuals would be baptized and then whole families would have been baptized as well....after a while, at least according to Augustine, baptism was necessary for entrance into heaven, so we got into the habit of baptizing babies lest something should happen to them in the meantime...so we still maintain that tradition, not as a matter of heaven or hell, but that we claim for our children our own professed vocation...we claim for them their

second life which at some point in time they will enter, a life for the greater good; we claim for them their rightful destiny...the rite of Confirmation came about so that those baptized as babies could confirm that they claim this second life for themselves...claim this life of living for the greater cause...the cause beyond themselves.

Theologians naturally have argued over the theology and timing of baptism, confirmation and other church rites, but the bottom line is that to be human we must at some point cross over from a life lived for ourselves only, into a life lived for the good of the whole...initiation rites since time immemorial across many cultures hold this to be true...Baptism an initiation into the community of followers of Jesus, we say...which is an even larger community of world changers.

In our passage today Jesus begins his second life, as all of us must, Jesus the lens through whom God sees us...he begins his life of *imago Dei*, the true human...*Imago Dei* a way of living, a life of loving sacrifice...and God is pleased and perhaps surprised to see such a thing...to see God's own handiwork there on the page...God's own identity mirrored in his beloved... and for Mark this is not only a proclamation of Jesus living into his Godlikeness, but that Jesus represents all the baptized of Israel...Mark is crafty here...he sets the scene in Judea and Jerusalem, the heart of the southern kingdom, and yet evokes the figure of Elijah whose ministry was in the northern parts of the divided monarchy. If you are savvy about your Biblical history, you remember there was always a decided tension between the divided northern and southern kingdoms of Israel...and indeed the ministry of Jesus also takes place in the north, in Galilee...so Mark is claiming that the figure of Jesus, and the movement he represents is a unifying, uniting force, full of the improvising Spirit which will tear open the heavens so that love will rule upon the earth and unite all the nations, the same ancient prophecy given to Abraham...love has no divisions.

We dare not read this as a story about Jesus, the son of God only... We must read this as our story as well, sons and daughters of God, initiated into a vocation of profound responsibility...into the ranks of world-changers... into the *imago Dei*...I think the secret is this: we hold on to the vulnerability that marks our first life, carry it with us with all due mindfulness...and then we cross over to living into the sacred responsibility of our second life...and the heavens are torn apart, and the Spirit of God indwells the earth...in every act of compassion, every act of generosity and love...where there is justice and dignity granted, the heavens are torn apart and the world, even if for a fleeting moment, is set right...and God is pleased once more with

God's sons and daughters.....and maybe even surprised yet again. God the great improviser.

I was reading over a couple of previous sermons that I have preached on this text, and the last one was on this feast day, the baptism of our Lord... and on that day we baptized Wyatt Ayres....And I told him during the sermon, to which I'm sure he was paying rapt attention, that he was to be a world changer....and that we had high hopes for him....and that over the years he would learn from us the imaginative art of compassion...and that we would also learn from him that art.

Baptism then is a life long process of growth, learning and transformation, a life long pilgrimage.... and our call brothers and sisters.... sons and daughters of God is to make the most of it....because our God has high hopes for us....God sees the pattern of God's own life in us...God has entrusted to us quite literally the keys to the kingdom of heaven....God gives us the high call to tear open the heavens and let love reign....and surely God will be pleased and most wonderfully surprised by the joy of it all.