

Epiphany II Year A

“I saw the Spirit descending from Heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.”

Lawyers know this: that their case isn't going to go too far without a credible witness. (I called my lawyer brother and verified this statement!) There can be evidence galore, circumstantial and otherwise... but the witness is the thing.....several recent trials in our own community have borne that out....a witness, someone who has seen the truth and can speak to it, speak of it with authority....I think it is in our DNA that we know the truth when we experience it....see it....hear it....

The language of the Gospel of John according to most Greek scholars is courtroom/ trial language...the words “witness” and “testify” and “advocate” are rife in this Gospel, and they are meant to evoke in the hearer a sense of a trial going on....In fact there are two trials going on in the narrative of this Gospel...One: The trial of an innocent man up and against the oppressive power of empire, the Jewish leadership in cahoots....and we know how that one turns out....and then Second: the trial about who in truth this person of Jesus really is....and to heighten the suspense....there is decided enmity between the Jewish synagogue authorities and this Greek speaking Jewish Christian community....In fact this Gospel has at times in the course of history been used as anti-Semitic propaganda....So we have a trial on several levels....a weighing of the truth, as it were, as to who this Jesus is....his legitimacy...and what will become of him and the movement he has inspired....up and against the way things are and the way things have been....this is a high stakes trial.

The prologue is, if you will, the opening argument in this trial....This is the One, this Jesus, the anonymous narrator, this advocate says, The One present from the beginning of time, the primordial Word that is God, the God who birthed the universe, he says; and that this God is found in the light of humankind, the person of Jesus the archetype, and this light will enlighten all of humankind....the jury must have been stunned, such language!....no one can know God fully, he continues....but this one...this one come down from heaven among us has shown us our intimate connection to this God who is not distant and aloof, but with us...showing us the way to the Father/Mother of us all....beautiful opening argument....but there is one thing lacking... a witness.

So after the prologue the scene opens with the scribes and Pharisees questioning John....not Jesus....but questioning John the Baptist, the first

witness in the trial....being questioned about who he is...and about who this Jesus is.....Now a little context here...John the Baptist according to historians had quite a following....and in this passage we have John demurring as to his stature....He is just the messenger he says.... He is merely the witness pointing to the one greater than he....he quotes Isaiah to bolster his testimony....John goes even so far as to defer his own disciples to Jesus and the Jesus movement in this passage....that doesn't happen in any other of the Gospels....So clearly here we have a polemic, some marketing from the author of this gospel arguing for the Jesus movement as the legitimate way forward in the faith....that John's ministry of baptism by water and repentance must decrease as Jesus' ministry and those who follow must increase.....and In John's testimony he says....here is the one (not me) who takes away the sins of the world....now this is crucial...the Greek word for sin here is "harmatia"....which means 'collective brokenness'....not what we moderns think that sin is: all the wrong and naughty things we individuals do...we've all got that, That's the human condition.... but that's not the issue for these new Testament scribes....the issue for them is the means of conquering the collective brokenness of our world....to undermine the insidious structures of sin that reach half unseen into the fabric of our world....And John's witness is that this way of Jesus is the means.

The energy in this passage is John's passionate witness; Just like the energy in a courtroom.... It's about the witness (You know in Perry Mason when the surprise witness bursts into the courtroom and sets everything straight)....John is a witness as one who has seen the truth, John the Baptist the mouthpiece, the persona chosen by this writer to speak for this community of John...all witnesses to who this Jesus is...they've seen and they've heard....and what John says as principal witness, the spokes-persona for this community is that he has seen the Spirit descend on Jesus and remain there....How does he know?...what makes him credible? How would one see the Spirit in the first place?... So with all due passion he witnesses quite simply to what he has seen and to what he has heard....He has seen the hungry fed....He has seen the diseased healed....If it please the court, he has seen the dead of our world raised to dignity....He has seen racial reconciliation...Jesus who gave the Samaritan woman living water at the well...He has seen forgiveness....He has seen compassion....He has seen inclusion and embrace...To see such things is to see the abiding Spirit....All these signs of the Spirit's presence. These are the things this community from whom we are hearing have seen with their own eyes,

through their own ministry...they are the witness, witnesses with authority....witnesses worth believing.

And we have seen the Spirit too sisters and brothers....We have seen people come from distant lands and make a home with us....we have seen the gratitude and relief of hungry people, our very neighbors, receiving food.....we have seen the joy of dignity by providing safe lodging and meals for families who for whatever circumstances don't have a home....we have seen this abiding Spirit....we are witnesses....we have seen the honor bestowed upon young incarcerated men who have been welcomed here for a meal and meaningful conversation as equals....We have seen mentally disabled members of the L'Arche community treated as fellow householders....We have buried our dead and have stood at the grave and proclaimed that God's life knows no bounds....that God's life inhabits even our very deaths....and we speak with authority because our witness by God's grace is credible.....because we have seen....and therefore we know....and without our witness there is no case.

There is a noticeable paradigm shift in this Gospel.... and that is this: John Baptized with the water of repentance.....a very common rite in Jewish culture and other Mediterranean cultures....a rite of cleansing, of purification....usually before Temple worship, or after childbirth or after an illness....But the writer of John is making a clear distinctive shift...that Jesus will baptize with Spirit....and that means Jesus will baptize with power....Greeks would get it ...the pneuma....Jews would get it: the Shekinah....that animating force, like a mighty wind, that enables us to see the world as God sees it and empowers us to act in that world.....as healers...as justice bearers....as ones who feed and clothe and teach and house....as the ones who love....and in our loving we become the new witnesses in the trial that has been continued and continued, and perhaps mistried over the ages...the grand epic trial weighing good against that which would oppose the good...the jury out in hopes of a credible witness who will tell of the truth....tell the truth so that others might abide in the same Spirit and gain power to do the same.....so another paradigm shift: Our witness becomes our doing the faith, not just seeing and hearing, but doing....our enlightened living out God's love in the world....our enlightened living that takes away the sins of the world, no less....a witness powerful and credible....because people will see love in the flesh...and there is no more profound knowledge or witness than that...love in the flesh.....and there will be others who will see and then do.

Jesus tells us in this Gospel that we are sent as he is sent.....and he uses the disturbing metaphor that like he, we are to be eaten and drunk....

Our body and blood that will nurture and transform our world....body and blood....which is to say our life and labor broken and poured out in witness to God's saving presence among us, healing the collective brokenness that abounds....If that is not true then what on earth do we live for?....Let the Spirit descend upon us and abide with us so that we will do the deeds as the anointed of God...the Anointed, our inherited name our Savior has bestowed upon us....Let us abide in this Spirit and act in the Spirit....and live, truly live to tell about it....witnesses bearing the truth, so the case, the trial, might rest at last.