

Epiphany III Year B 2018

It seems to me that throughout the whole of human existence we have grappled with the idea of God somewhere between illusion and reality. Alas, more illusion than reality. We have spoken of God as all powerful, all knowing, never changing. In our collective imagination we have spoken of God as moving mountains; parting the seas; creating from the void of chaos the universe entire. We speak of this God as good, but we find in scripture a God who wreaks havoc upon not just the enemies of God's chosen people, but also upon the very people whom we are told God loves. We wonder that if God is good, why is there so much evil in the world. A good question. And because this God has infinite being, we lament that we can't know fully this God; that our finite minds are incapable of apprehending the reality of who God is.

We have concocted language over the centuries with which to speak of this problem... this problem of God being so distant from us. We say that we are fallen; fallen from God's favor; fallen from God's presence. John Calvin in the early 16th century called the human race utterly depraved. The church has even cobbled together the doctrine of 'substitutionary atonement'. That doctrine says that the human estate is so wretched that it took God engineering the torture and death of his beloved Son to pay the ransom for our depravity. So at least since the

early Middle Ages, our religion has sustained itself on the theological premise that we are in dire need of being washed from our abject sinfulness in the hopes of achieving life in heaven after death. Sometime in the 1950's the phrase was coined that the church was a "sanctuary for saints, and a hospital for sinners." We really didn't mean the sanctuary for saints part... they were all dead... but we really meant the hospital for sinners part, and the church has become the place wherein our sinful souls are saved from the gates of hell... not because we deserve it, but because the ransom was paid for us by Jesus' death on the cross. This spurious, and I would say, pathological theology has plagued for centuries the church... fear its calling card; the Romans have made a high art of it... and in the modern world it has fed our insatiable obsession with perfection.... It has fed our hyper-individualistic tendencies, so much so that salvation has become all about the individual... all about me; all about my happiness, my dignity; my well-being. Many folks these days reject such a theology.

I just returned from a meeting with deputies who will attend the next General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Austin this summer... We talked about a number of subjects and a range of issues... but the over-arching concern of the group is the perception that the church is dying... or at least that it is in decline... Numbers on the rolls have dropped precipitously over the last several

decades, not just in the Episcopal Church, but in the mainstream denominations as a whole... The talk in our meeting was how are we going to turn this around? Nobody said it, but I could almost hear it: How can we get back to the church of the fifties when churches were bursting at the seams? All Saints here in Mobile in 1958, according to our archives, had the largest children's Sunday school enrollment in the state of Alabama... 450! And of course we talked about money... not enough money for the national church... not enough money for the diocese... not enough money in our congregations. People around the room were nodding their heads.

I just wasn't buying this dying decline thing. I sensed the familiar tension between illusion and reality. Could it be, I thought, that the church is in the midst of renewal, remaking... Could it be that we are not dying, but getting our act together... Could we be experiencing transformation? I don't see signs of death in the church. I see life; just ask newcomers to All Saints... Numbers and dollars aren't necessarily the benchmark for health... Could it be that we are beating ourselves up just because that's what we've always done... We've gotten so good at it. We've had centuries of practice.

Mark begins his gospel with the proclamation of Good News to a struggling church, a church arguably in decline and dying. A church that is suspect to imperial authorities because they are feared to be complicit with the resistance... “The Good News about the message of Jesus Christ begins here,” Mark says... and of course ‘here’ is at the river Jordan... Jesus in the presence of John the Baptizer being baptized for the repentance of sin... repentance, that is, metanoia... baptized into an awakening to reality... metanoia: the stripping away of illusion, and waking up to the way things really are... Repentance is not saying you’re sorry.... It’s about waking up.... So that is what this gospel will be about... It will be about the waking up of God’s people... waking up to reality... death to illusion, and rising to the true faith... and for Mark, it is a rising into the reality and presence of God... and that brings us to our reading for this morning.

Mark is moving swiftly here in his “good news’ narrative. We are only to verse twenty one in the first chapter, and Jesus has already been baptized, been sent into the desert to be tested for forty days, and he has called his disciples... He’s getting with the Baptism program, as it were... and here he is teaching in a synagogue on the north shore of Galilee... and we are told that his teaching is fresh, forthright... astounding... that his teachings carry authority... Now that’s an important word here in our text... authority... It has the same root as authentic... It

is about ringing true... we know authority when we hear it... It also has the same root as author... authority is from the source... For the Greeks and for the Jews authority was granted by God... authority speaks of reality... and false authority, presumed authority, is illusion. Mark is being subversive here. He is contrasting the authority of God up and against the powers that be. He is in short separating reality from illusion.

So here's the thing: Here's the reality of the Good News. Jesus is the representative of all the Baptized. He is us ... and the baptized in their vocation carry the authority of God Godself... Mark doesn't tell us yet what Jesus was teaching in the synagogue... but you know what it is.... Take care of the poor among you.... Invite the outcasts to your homes... heal people who are sick.... Visit people in prison... welcome the stranger, the immigrant...stand against evil.... call out injustice.... Serve the greater Good... Love your neighbor.

Brothers and sisters there is no greater authority in this universe than love... nothing rings more true than our choice for Love; and love is our vocation; the vocation of the baptized; the very process of the Jesus movement. Love is reality. It forbids and dispels illusion; it demands honesty; it requires sacrifice; It seeks community; it belies isolation... When will we ever believe the simple

phrase that God is Love... God is not asking us to believe rightly; God is not calling us to self-improvement or success... repentance does not mean for us to change as much as it means for us to wake up to Love... and to wake up to love is to wake up to the reality of God among us... That is the Good News, and it begins with us.

Dear friends, don't look for God aloof in the heavens; don't look for God written among the lofty pages of theological treatise... don't look to so-called super nature... that is illusion. Look for God in your vocation. Wake up to the reality that God is present in the process of welcoming the stranger; in the process of raising up the broken-hearted; God is present in our forgiving seven times seventy... and that God is astounding; and that authority can't be resisted. Love is irresistible. It rings true. It always has. Love is God, and God is Love... If you want to know one thing in this life; know that.... That is the reality we seek; that is the Good News... all else is illusion.