

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring
Gospel Reading: Matthew 3:13-17
January 12, 2020



*'In that quick light and life, as water spills
And streams around the Man like quickening rain,
The voice that made the universe reveals
The God in Man who makes it new again.
He calls us too, to step into that river
To die and rise and live and love forever.'
Amen.*

What is it like to be proximate to a wonder?

What was it like, do you imagine, when the Word who became flesh touched the water? What was it like to be John, to be right next to Jesus, alongside the Alpha and the Omega, standing with him in the muddy river? Did it feel electric? Did the Jordan shimmer and dazzle? Was it cool and fresh, or did it warm on his skin as he poured over the One who had come to set all life free?

What is it like to get proximate to the kind of holiness God intends for each of us?

I'd like to say that this is what we were looking for - a proximity to the holy, that is - almost this time last year when forty or so of us from All Saints' made our own appearance on the banks of the Jordan. Was a hint or sign of the holy in our sights? Perhaps a pebble that Jesus had pressed his toes into. Or a rock that John the Baptist had rested upon, just to take it all in.

Maybe that was the kind of holy proximity we had been hoping for, but it was not quite what we found. Instead of the landscape of John the Baptist, of wild haired clothing and honey and locusts, across the water from us was an armed Israeli soldier and a posse of German Lutherans who not only sang all the way through our quietly dignified service taking place on the other side of the Jordan River, but released a white dove as they reached their finale, as if to rub it in somehow. No mystical pebbles, no epiphanies upon the rocks, just a quiet Episcopalian renewal of baptismal vows; and when it was over, we turned to get back on the bus and look elsewhere for the elusive footsteps of Jesus.

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634 West Peachtree Street NW • Atlanta, Georgia 30308
Telephone 404-881-0835 • Facsimile 404-881-3796
allsaintsatlanta.org

And then it happened. The wonder we had been looking for came to us. She was dressed in a bright yellow rain jacket, hardly spoke any English but was clear as anyone could have been when she asked if she also could be baptized. It was not what I was expecting. Yet there she was. Her face lit up, and with a clarity of gaze that said well beyond words that the Holy One was already at home within her. “Yes, you can”, I answered, and I baptized her, on the banks of the Jordan, where John and the Savior of the World had had a holy moment of their own all those years before.

What is it like to be proximate to a wonder? It is like that. Like a glory that breaks in, letting us know that none of this is about meeting our expectations, but about how we will be changed when we choose to take up God’s invitation to get into the water too. It is like the sacrament of baptism, that teaches us that our vocation as followers of Jesus is not to get what we are looking for, or are hoping to find for ourselves, but that our call is to be open to the God whose holiness is proximate to us all of the time, in every person that bears the gift of life.

Are you willing to look for wonder like that? Are you willing to see the God who made the heavens and the earth in the life of the other in your midst?

Most of the time, if we are honest about it, our answer to that question is ‘no’. Most of us, if we are truthful about how we go about living in the world, don’t live as if we expect to see the glory of God made manifest in the life of the next person we meet. Gandhi once said that if you don’t find God in the face of the next person you encounter, stop looking. The problem is that that is exactly what tends to happen. We give up on looking for God in others.

Indeed, it is one of the great challenges of our particular place in time that our customization of our experience of the world has the capacity to write people we don’t wish to be around out of the script entirely. We can drive from our home to our gym to our workplaces to our particular grocery stores in our particular neighborhoods and we need never come across anyone who isn’t to all extents and purposes just like us. Our social media accounts and our vacation destinations and favorite entertainment venues only reinforce our notion of how popular our particular view of the world is, because we rarely meet anyone who doesn’t share it with us.

Only you will know the degree to which any of this is true for you and for the life you lead. Yet, whether it is true for you a little or a lot, what does hold true for all of us is that we need communities like this one that will challenge our singular constructions of the world. For while Dr. King’s words may still be true that we are at this time of the day on this day of the week in America’s most segregated hour, the Church is not designed to be that way.

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Here, there is no price of admission. This table does not require a reservation. The rules of the house are entirely simple: all are welcome, all the time, no exceptions. Yet the secret to the success of Christianity's longevity is that if you don't see in front of you the Church as you believe it should be, then you are invited to make it different. If you don't see enough diversity here in this parish, for instance, then invite people to come to church here who will change that reality. If you think that this church needs to reflect more the city that you see around you, then welcome people in from that city to make their spiritual home here. The gift of the Church is that it will always and only ever be a redemptive work in progress; and the point of the ministry of all the baptized is that in the end, the Church is a cooperative more than anything else, so we all get to make the future here.

Yet, to seek God's holiness in every human life also means that you and I cannot stop with striving to transform the Church; we will have to come to terms with ourselves too. We will have to confront our own tendencies to bigotry and self-righteousness, and get out of our echo chambers and beyond the horizons for life that only we get to draw. For perhaps we have focused too much on the baptismal covenant in our Episcopal tradition as a manifesto for the reordering of the world, and have failed to see how a reordering of ourselves is required of us first.

Baptism is an incredible gift in the life of the Church, in the life that you and I share, because it is a consistent return to our need for honesty about how we actually live as followers of Jesus. We will offer to these children the gift of mature Christian community every time that we make space for that honesty at the heart of our lives. God calls us all into an 'epiphanied' sort of life; a life that makes the divine manifest to others because it has learned to accept its need to 'to die and rise and live' again. May we turn to the Christ that is right beside us, and see the wonder of the living God in our midst. A gift, not to be taken or grasped, but to be challenged by, and by the One who makes all things new. Even you and me.

Amen.