

Epiphany One - B - January 11, 2009  
St. David's

Though it has now been nearly 70 years since it's release, it still holds a central place in Americana. It has become a classic film, chiefly because it continues to speak to each new generation in fresh ways. Phrases from the movie remain a part of our lexicon today. Who here hasn't said, "There's no place like home", or "follow the yellow brick road", or "lions and tigers and bears, oh my!" or "We're not in Kansas anymore." But the line I want to talk about this morning is one that occurs near the end of the 1939 film.

The story's heroes have finally arrived in the idyllic land of Oz, where the world has suddenly turned technicolor. These heroes have presented themselves in front of the grand and all powerful Wizard. It is a frightening scene for a kid, or at least it used to be in the days before computerized visual effects. The belching smoke, the holographic image of the Wizard's head, before holograms existed, and the teeth shattering, thunderous voice of the Wizard terrified me as a five year old, just like it did Dorothy, the lion, the scarecrow and the tin man. But it did not frighten Dorothy's little pipsqueak dog. Toto is the one that pulls away the curtain to expose the actual Wizard, a frail figure of a man with a very soft, very non-threatening voice and demeanor, controlling a series of levers and buttons to create the magical sounds and images. In a desperate attempt to keep up the ruse, the Wizard yells through his megaphone my favorite line. "PAY NO ATTENTION TO THAT MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN!"

Forgive me for the sacrilegious comparison, but I have to tell you, whenever I hear any of the four stories of Jesus' baptism in the Gospels, it is really difficult for me to not think of that scene in the Wizard of Oz. For those of us who grew up watching that movie

every year, what else could come to mind for us when Mark describes the moment of Jesus' baptism in Cecille B. Demille terms. Using the same metaphor he uses at Jesus' death, we hear this morning that at the instant he comes up out of the water, "the heavens are torn apart." Then of course, that voice coming from heaven saying, "YOU ARE MY SON, THE BELOVED, WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED." How can we not picture God's three dimensional face, the size of 100 football fields, taking up the entire sky while a booming voice announcing Jesus as the most amazing person to ever set foot on the earth. Just as I was scared to death of that vision of the Wizard as a child, I also saw Jesus' baptism as a frightening event that was meant to point out the uniqueness of Jesus and the overwhelming power of God. It was simultaneously scary and magical, just like the movie.

Unfortunately, it is often difficult for us to shake the pre-critical images of our childhood. While none of us actually believe that God is the great and powerful Oz, our theologies continue to suggest that we have not let go of this image. We may consciously reject the notion of a pyrotechnic God coming on the clouds, whose voice splits redwood trees, but it seems that in many ways this remains our lens for how we imagine God. And when that is the way we understand how God operates, what we hear God doing today is anointing Jesus as the one and only special agent of God. God is the Wizard and today he gives Jesus magic powers to change the world.

This has led us to interpret Christianity as a religion centered on belief, belief in God the Father as an overwhelming presence beyond us, and belief in the Son, who was deemed by God as the most unique individual of all time, a person who was not really a person at all, but a God who could do anything through apparitional powers.

Because these images are so much a part of what so many consider the essence of Christianity, there has been a gigantic backlash whenever anyone within the tradition has decided to play the role of Toto. Attempts to pull back the curtain on today's story of Jesus' baptism, or any other biblical lesson, by applying a critical ear, have often been referred to as blasphemous. The fear has been overwhelming that if we tried to pull back the curtain, it would diminish God's power and might, reducing God to an old guy pulling levers and pushing buttons to create a false facade. And of course, if God is not a real wizard, than Jesus is not a real magician.

I would suggest to all of you this morning, that it is this fear of exposing God like the Wizard was exposed, that has kept our faith in the pre-critical naivete of our childhood. If we are to move beyond these childhood images of Christ and God, if we are going to go beyond God as Wizard and Jesus as magician, we must not be afraid to be Toto, we must not be afraid to pay attention to the man behind the curtain. We need to take a critical view of our text, pulling back the curtain so that we may see what the Gospel writers really meant by utilizing the literary device of the heavens tearing and a voice announcing Jesus. I believe that this is essential to a mature faith, because it is behind that curtain that we can discover the real intention behind today's Gospel and the ultimate meaning of life.

We begin pulling back that curtain with the realization that today is the beginning for Jesus. Yes, we start the Christian year in the nothingness of Advent. Then we move into the Christmas season where we celebrate incarnation, of God with us. But it is impossible to understand the meaning of Christmas and the importance of Christ in our lives unless we begin with the moment where Jesus begins. Today.

This is the week in our liturgical calendar that makes even the most casual listener say, what the heck just happened? Last week Jesus was portrayed by Max Grim, being visited by three wise guys... from afar. And this week he is 30 years old? We have just one lonely story in only one of the four Gospels about Jesus at the age of 12. Otherwise, not only do we not know anything about his childhood, or his education, or his upbringing, we don't even have a single story from his adult life until he is about 30 years old. Why? Well, to put it bluntly, because no one cared. Jesus' life was so inconsequential before today, that evangelists can't find anything to say about it even years later when people want to hear every intimate detail about him.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Mark is the very beginning of that book. The first Gospel written starts not with a birth, but with a baptism. Only much later did Matthew and Luke append on to their Gospels the Christmas stories. Those prequels were all added after the fact, just like George Lucas did with the Star Wars series.

Here is what is behind the first curtain that we pull back this morning. Jesus comes up out of the water and God says to him, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Except, only, Jesus has not done a blessed thing, so to speak. All that he will accomplish will happen *after* today. Today's Gospel is not about God rewarding Jesus for a job well done and then anointing him to have magical powers. This is not the story of a Wizard God zapping his special Son with phantasmal powers. Instead, these are the words of a God who sees the good in an insignificant man who has done absolutely nothing in 30 years. This is a God saying, "Yes, pay attention to the man behind the curtain. I am not the fearful God of power and pyrotechnic fame, but the God who loves *you* and

believes in *you*, even though you haven't yet done a thing to justify that belief and love." "I believe", God tells Jesus, that you are my servant, the one described in our first reading today from Isaiah, the one who will open the eyes of the blind, bring out the prisoners from their dungeon, and establish justice on the earth. And that is enough for Jesus. God believes that he can do it, and the rest, as they say, is history.

This is the second major unveiling behind the curtain that makes today's Gospel so important to us. This is not a unique event that happens only to Jesus. All of the Gospel writers tell us, like Mark does today, that people from the "whole Judean countryside and ALL the people of Jerusalem were gathering at the Jordan to be baptized." What happens to Jesus is also happening to so many others who are standing shoulder to shoulder with him in the river Jordan. It is what can also happen to you and me in the waters of baptism.

Today's Gospel is not a shock and awe Gospel. It is, in fact, quite the opposite. Rather than create a wall between us and the great and powerful Oz, it is meant to break down that wall. It is meant to show us the deep love and abiding faith that God has, not just in Jesus, but in you and me, regardless of how little we think we have accomplished. In the same way, rather than creating the image of a Jesus who is so far beyond us and has been endowed by God with magical powers, what we really have today is a story of a man that all of us can relate to on a very personal level. The whole point of today's Gospel is not that God is speaking to one rare individual the world is to never see the likes of again, but rather that God is speaking to you. "*You* are my beloved, with *you* I am well pleased."

We are reminded of this again in our first reading from Isaiah, the one that God alludes to in today's Gospel. In verses six and seven, we realize that God is not speaking

of one person who will bring about this justice, but is addressing these comments to all of God's people. "I am Yahweh. I'm the one who took you by the hand and kept you, I'm the one who called you into covenant, and now I'm the one calling you to be a light to the nations, and to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon." God is not suggesting that one person is the servant of justice, but rather God is speaking to *all* of the Hebrew people. Isaiah quotes God as describing not the role of an individual, but the job of a community. This is what all of God's servants are to do. In and through the waters of baptism, each of us are filled with the Holy Spirit. But even more importantly, what we learn today is that God is not just calling Jesus his Beloved, but rather all of us. Each of us are pleasing to God, even if we haven't yet done a blessed thing. Then, each of us are called to live those words of the prophet Isaiah. That is why in the Baptismal Covenant that we will reaffirm together in a few minutes, I will ask you if you will strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. That is what baptism is all about. It is not a magic potion that protects us from evil or prevents us from going to hell. It is a call. A call to utilize the gift of the Holy Spirit that descends upon us to bring forth justice.

When baptism is not understood within a community concept as Mark and all the evangelists describe it, we are left to understand this event as something that is being "done to an individual." This led the early church to actually be embarrassed by Jesus' baptism. How do you explain the sinless Jesus submitting himself to being baptized by the self proclaimed lowly prophet, John the Baptist?

But such understandings are all a fall back into Wizard of Oz theology. Jesus is not being baptized to be cleansed of sin, he is receiving the gift of the Spirit, that will change

his life's work. And it is not John baptizing Jesus, it is God. What happens in baptism has nothing to do with the person doing the baptizing, it is God acting in and through the entire community. No one has to give an explanation for why a wild-eyed, bug eating prophet is baptizing Jesus, just as no one here needs to be worried about a wild-eyed radical priest baptizing you. God is the one who is acting, not John, not me, and God is the one that tells you that you are God's beloved.

If we cannot move away from the Wizard of Oz vision of the baptism of Jesus, we will continue to fall into the trap that the church did for centuries. We will see this event as something that was special for Jesus only, and that can't happen to little ol' us. We will be stuck with a laissez faire theology of waiting on Jesus to come save us, while the world burns. But when we remove the curtain, we can see Baptism as a call, a call for you and I to live into the servant song of Isaiah 42 and finally accept the notion that we are the ones with whom God is well pleased.

Baptism is the beginning of everything for us. When we realize that God is pleased with us, it is life changing, it is world changing. That is the theology of baptism that we tried so hard to symbolize as you walk into this building, with those flowing waters outside and inside, where you follow that river right into the church. Every time you walk in here, the hope is that you are reminded of two things. First, that You are God's beloved, and second, your charge is to go out there and make it happen, bringing hope and comfort to the people the world has shoved aside.

All of you who served on our building committee know first hand that many folk have yet to pull back the curtain on the Wizard of Oz interpretation of today's Gospel. We had

an immense conflict with our architects, who saw no need for baptismal symbols at the entrance to the church. They were dismayed by what they saw as our over the top metaphors and they positively begged us to not include the river pattern in blue, but rather a “subtle shade of lighter brown.” Beloved, there will be no subtle shades of anything here at St. David’s when it comes to Baptism. This is it. It is our beginning in faith and it is our link to an immanent God, instead of a wizard or magical God.

Finally, it has occurred to me in the midst of all this, that perhaps we have inadvertently created our own magic Wizard curtain right here. Perhaps we have created a situation where I am telling you to pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. Perhaps we have created our own secret area where the magic happens. So before you leave here today, I ask each and every one of you who have never been back there before, to open one more curtain, this literal one. See all the levers and pulleys for yourself. See that there is no magic here, except the magic of a God who cares for you and believes in you, even before we ever do a thing. And while you are back there, check out the bathroom designed by the same architect’s that thought a blue river in our narthex was not appropriate for a church.

It is time for each of us to expose the Wizard. Let us remove the curtains so that we may see the God who calls each of us Beloved and asks each of us to follow in the footsteps of a Jesus who changed everything. Amen.