**Weekend of Sunday, January 8, 2023**

**Baptism of Our Lord/Lectionary 1/Year A**

**First Reading: Isaiah 42:1-9**

**Second Reading: Acts 10:34-43**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 3:13-17**

**Sermon Title: *“Let the Epiphany Begin!”***

**Theme**

*In the waters of the Jordan, Jesus is revealed as the beloved Son of God. Through this great epiphany, Jesus fulfills all righteousness and becomes the servant of God who will bring forth justice and be a light to the nations. In the waters of baptism we too are washed by the Word, anointed by the Spirit, and named God’s beloved children. Our baptismal mission is to proclaim good news to all who are oppressed or in need of God’s healing.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Isaiah 42:1-9**

1Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
  my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
 I have put my spirit upon him;  
  he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
 2He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
  or make it heard in the street;  
 3a bruised reed he will not break,  
  and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
  he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
 4He will not grow faint or be crushed  
  until he has established justice in the earth;  
  and the coastlands wait for his teaching.  
  
 5Thus says God, the Lord,  
  who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
  who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
 who gives breath to the people upon it  
  and spirit to those who walk in it:  
 6I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,  
  I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
 I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
  a light to the nations,  
  7to open the eyes that are blind,  
 to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
  from the prison those who sit in darkness.  
 8I am the Lord, that is my name;  
  my glory I give to no other,  
  nor my praise to idols.  
 9See, the former things have come to pass,  
  and new things I now declare;  
 before they spring forth,  
  I tell you of them.

**Second Reading: Acts 10:34-43**

34Peter began to speak to [Cornelius and his household]: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. 37That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

**Gospel: Matthew 3:13-17**

13Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 15But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. 16And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

**Sermon**

I recognize that we are all wired differently. Speaking only for myself, I like it when the readings flow in a clear linear path and that is what we have in the First Reading, then the Gospel Reading, and then the Second Reading – which you probably know is the correct chronological order of the readings.

The First Reading from Isaiah is clearly a prophecy about Jesus. The voice is the LORD's, and what the LORD told the Israelites was that the LORD was presenting the LORD's own servant, about whom the LORD said, 42:1 "my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him"

And then in the Gospel Reading, Matthew wrote that at Jesus' baptism,

3:16bthe heavens were opened to him [Jesus] and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Do you see what I mean by a clear linear path? In Isaiah, the LORD prophesied about putting the LORD’s Spirit on the LORD’s servant, in whom the LORD delights – that is Jesus. And then in Matthew, after his baptism, the Spirit descended on the same Jesus, and he heard the voice of God say that God is “well-pleased” with him. Prophecy and fulfillment!

But the more festively important reading for today, the principal festival of the Baptism of Our Lord, is the Second Reading. The Second Reading comes from Acts and the post-resurrection apostolic period. But before we get to the actual text of the Second Reading, some context is needed.

Without context, we wouldn't know that Cornelius, the co-star of the Second Reading, was a Gentile and a centurion of the Italian Cohort, a commander in the Roman army. Additionally, Luke wrote back in 10:2, that Cornelius,

10:2was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.

Why would Cornelius, an Italian Gentile and a centurion, a commander in the Roman army be devoted to the God of the Jews, you ask? I don’t know, except to say the Holy Spirit descends on whomever the Spirit chooses! And I can only postulate further that Cornelius was noticed by God because he faithfully lived out his life of discipleship giving generously to help the poor and praying constantly to God. We ought to make a note of that: faithfully living out one's life of discipleship giving generously to help the poor and praying constantly to God, gets God's attention.

One time, (10:3) at about three o'clock in the afternoon, while Cornelius was praying, he received a vision of an angel of God telling him to send for a man by the name of "Simon who is called Peter." So Cornelius sent a couple of his servants and one of his trusted soldiers to find Peter and bring him back.

About noon the next day, the apostle "Simon who is called Peter," the other co-star of the Second Reading from Acts, received a vision of a large sheet with all kinds of animals on it descending from heaven, and a disembodied voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." However, the issue Peter had with this command was that among the animals were some that the Jews considered unclean: reptiles, birds, and maybe even pigs, and at this early time in the apostolic period, it was understood that Christians were converted Jewish Christians who still adhered to the Law of Moses including all of its dietary laws. So Peter, being an observant Jewish Christian said about killing and eating those unclean animals in the vision,

10:14"By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." 15The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

This same vision repeated itself three times, and Peter was quite confused when Cornelius's men showed up and told him what they wanted. Peter went with them and was introduced to the Gentile and a centurion of the Italian Cohort, a commander in the Roman army, Cornelius. Let me remind you that observant Jewish Christians like Peter avoided contact with Gentiles because the Jews considered Gentiles unclean. And it was during that conversation that a light bulb went off in Peter's brain (couldn't have been a light bulb, electricity hadn’t been discovered yet). The sheet descending from heaven filled with unclean animals and the voice telling him to kill and eat was the Holy Spirit’s way of telling Peter that all that God has made is clean, even a Gentile and a centurion of the Italian Cohort, a commander in the Roman army by the name of Cornelius. And this is where our Second Reading comes in.

34Peter began to speak to [Cornelius and his household]: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

And why, on the principal festival of the Baptism of Our Lord, the passage stops here when the climax comes in the next few verses is a mystery to me, but because I am your benevolent and humble spiritual leader, I will tell you how the story ends. Peter gave his testimony to Cornelius and his household and preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ and then:

44While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. 45The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, 46for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, 47Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? **48So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.**

Well, this story caused quite a commotion among the council of apostles and they called for Peter to explain himself, which he did, and thanks be to God, rather than stubbornly stick to their Judeo-Christian understanding of the new Christian movement, the council of apostles *also* saw the Holy Spirit at work and that led them to conclude that even Gentiles can be Christian, and without first becoming Jewish or abiding by the Law of Moses, and aren’t we glad, because we are Gentiles.

Today is not only the principal festival of the Baptism of Our Lord. It is also the First Sunday after the Epiphany. Epiphany means a *manifestation, an illuminating discovery, a revelation*. So isn't it fitting then, on this First Sunday after the Epiphany, that we have two stories of epiphany:

* In the Gospel Reading, Jesus was revealed as the fulfillment of ancient prophecy, and the Son of God, the beloved, with whom God is pleased;
* and in the Second Reading, the Holy Spirit was revealed to the apostles doing a new thing, upsetting their narrow understanding of orthodoxy.

Today we will celebrate the baptism of three young people who were not raised Christian in a Christian culture, and never went to church. Azy, MJ, and Kato were raised Muslim in the Middle East. It is a long unhappy story, but when they had an opportunity to immigrate to the United States to be reunited with Azy and Kato's mother, Flower Azary, they jumped at the chance. Do they know anything about a life of discipleship under the lordship of Jesus Christ? Probably more than you think – they attend my confirmation class every week.

I have often observed that people that are new to the faith or new to the local church are more enthusiastic about their lives of faith than the rest of us who were raised in the church. For them, everything can be a discovery – an epiphany!

For example, in just the few years that Flower has been a member here, she has served on the school board and the Council and is present at just about every event. She has transmitted that enthusiasm to her young family. For example, all three, Azy, MJ, and Kato along with Gary Shane and Flower were here serving Thanksgiving Day dinner.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

Throughout the Season of Epiphany, which runs up to The Transfiguration of Our Lord, February 19, you can expect to hear more stories revealing who God in Christ is. But the stories will also reveal what is expected of us.

Today's readings tell us that the Holy Spirit of the Living God refuses to cooperate with our narrow understanding of orthodoxy. The Holy Spirit of the Living God will do what it will, and we would be wise to notice and join it there.

**Prayer**

O God our Father, at the baptism of Jesus you proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit. Make all who are baptized into Christ faithful to their calling to be your daughters and sons, and empower us all with your Spirit, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**