

I speak to you in the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.
Please be seated.

This morning marks an important day in the life of the Christian Church as we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord. While it may feel like a “fast forward” from Christmas and the birth of Jesus to his baptism about 30 years later, today’s readings bring us full circle back to the story we encountered prior to Christmas. Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, are miraculously expecting a child and this is foretold by the angel, Gabriel. Zechariah is instructed to call the unborn child John. It will be this same angel, Gabriel, who will visit Mary six months later to foretell the birth of Jesus as the Son of God. Mary then goes to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, and the two women share an extraordinary time together in anticipation of the births of their sons.

Baptism was certainly not part of the Jewish tradition when either Jesus or John the Baptist were born. Both babies would have been circumcised at 8 days of age. We also know that Jesus, according to Jewish tradition, was presented at the Temple 33 days after his birth. A purification offering would also have been made on Mary’s behalf. The same would have been true for John the Baptist and his mother, Elizabeth. As we heard in last week’s Gospel passage, John’s role will be to prepare the way for Jesus and his ministry.

And so, we have this very poignant moment in this morning’s Gospel from Luke when we hear of these two, now grown men, John and Jesus, coming together on the banks of the Jordan River. Baptism through water represents a new kind of covenant between God and humankind. In our time, we refer to baptism as a sacrament. But 2000-some odd years ago, this was revolutionary and definitely a departure from Jewish traditions. All that the

angel, Gabriel, had foretold to Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, and Elizabeth comes to pass and this moment of John baptizing Jesus and the appearance of the dove and voice from heaven tell us that this is the climax in this particular story.

Theologians use the word, “theophany”, to describe those very special moments when God reveals Himself to humankind in an overt, yet still mysterious way. An event of theophany is a human encounter with God that is temporary and visible in some way. Sometimes it is through the appearance of an angel, such as Gabriel. What we have described here in our Gospel passage from Luke this morning is also an event of theophany; the heavens are opened and there is the appearance of a dove and a voice from heaven declares, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” The Gospel of Mark agrees with the words used by this mysterious voice, and the Gospel of Matthew gives us a slight variation with, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” It will be this same voice that will speak at the Transfiguration that we will mark this year on March 2, and we have that event detailed in the same Gospels of Luke, Mark, and Matthew.

It is important to note that an event of theophany is not a face-to-face encounter with God Himself, as we were reminded in our Gospel reading last Sunday from John when we heard, “No one has ever seen God.” In human form, it is only Christ that has had that full encounter with God. It is only when we die and pass into eternal life that we will see God, just as we are reminded in 1 Corinthians 13, verse 12: “For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

I find it very interesting that Scriptures so often tell us that a revelation from God to humankind is matched with a corresponding event in the natural world. This past week, when we celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany, we also found a response from nature to God's revealing presence through the extraordinary star that provided visual direction to the Magi; the three kings that brought the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the Christ-child. And, when we mark Good Friday later this year, we will hear of earthquakes and a darkness at mid-day that happened at the moment of Christ's death. When Moses first encounters God, it is through a burning bush that is not consumed by its fire. We hear of other times in the Book of Exodus when thunder, smoke, and fire are present when God communicates with Moses. The parting of the Red Sea and the appearance of a column of cloud to block the Egyptian army when the Israelites crossed over to safety are other examples. These events of theophany are also moments of God revealing Himself to humankind with a corresponding response in nature.

And so, when we return to the Gospel story for today that describes this very special moment, when all that was foretold by the angel Gabriel comes to fruition, it really isn't very surprising that the act of John baptizing Jesus is matched by a response from the natural world – the parting of the heavens, the appearance of the dove, and the sound of the voice. This is an event of theophany, when God breaks through and makes contact with human beings in an extraordinary way that is also loaded with symbolism. We know that the dove is a symbol that crosses both the Old and New Testaments, and we first hear of the dove in the book of Genesis when it appears with the sprig from the olive tree to announce the end of the flood and to mark a new beginning

for humankind and our relationship with God. The New Testament tells us that the dove symbolizes the presence of the Holy Spirit and that it is a creature that also represents love, purity, peace, and humility. We will hear of the return of the dove several more times this year in our readings. And so, it is no accident and no coincidence that the dove appears at this crucial moment in the life of Christ that also marks the formal start to his 3-year ministry. This is the moment in which God calls Jesus to a life of service.

When we reflect on our other readings for this morning, we have additional instances in which God is calling human beings to lives of service. In our Old Testament passage from Isaiah, we hear of God telling the people of Israel that they have been redeemed, that they are safe, and that they will return to their homeland. God is telling them that he will gather them up as His people who are to serve Him. Our psalm for this morning is also known as, "The Voice of God in a Great Storm". Again, we have a response from nature to the voice of God as the people gather to praise Him. And in our New Testament reading from Acts, we join Peter and John as disciples who are journeying to Samaria which is home to a newly forming Christian community. Some people in this region have already responded to God's call to them and have committed to the Christian way of life. But it is only through the prayers of Peter and John and their laying on of hands over the people of Samaria that the Holy Spirit comes upon them.

Sometimes, as clergy, we are asked why God doesn't seem to appear to us in the same ways that he did to the ancient people of the Old and New Testaments. Essentially, the question is, "Why don't we experience these same moments of theophany that Moses and other people of the Bible

experienced?” It can be easy for us to think that God can’t really be calling us to anything because a dove hasn’t suddenly appeared or there has been no overt voice from God telling us to take up a particular ministry. But God does still call us; perhaps in different or more subtle ways. The call is still there. The challenge in our century is to clear away the noise and busy-ness and the distractions of life in order to be able to hear and to discern the call of God. This is why we have times of retreat and why we take time away on the Sabbath; to hear God’s call for our lives. Reflecting again on the role of nature in relation to God’s revealing presence, perhaps it will be through a focused time in the natural world that God will speak to us.

In the Anglican tradition, we have a prayer that is said over the newly baptized; one that was inspired by the Gospel accounts of the baptism of Christ. I will say it now for all of us as we spend time this week thinking about what God is calling us to in this new year; both as individuals and as a faith community. Let us pray: “Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon these your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised them to the new life of grace. Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen.”