

## SPG#153, EPIPHANY IA

January 13, 2008 – Fr. Charles Pope

Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

The prominent image in today's scriptures is the image of the Baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. Now it is true that words sometimes directly say things and, at times, indicate things. Images also directly communicate things and indicate things. The words about the Baptism of Jesus and the images associated with the words are an historical registration of that event. But far beyond a reporting of the actual fact, the words and images of the Baptism of Jesus are strongly suggestive and indicative for our own lives as followers of Jesus. They are strongly suggestive and indicative for our own Baptism.

During the awareness expanding season of Epiphany, if the Baptism of Jesus can be seen as a convex lens, we will see through that lens into an expanding and more comprehensive view of his life and mission, of our own lives, our own baptism, our own lives in Christ.

We see the Baptism of Jesus in the larger context of his life and mission, in the larger context of the anticipation of his coming, in the larger context of the prophecies that foretold his coming. Today we are challenged toward a more comprehensive view of the Messiah by the prophet Isaiah who foretells his coming.

Isaiah begins in the first place, by referring to the Messiah who is to come. He further says that the Messiah will bring forth justice to the nations. In explaining justice, Isaiah says that He, the Messiah, will not break a bruised reed, and a dimly burning wick he will not blow out. In other words, justice means that God is an equal opportunity employer.

Jesus Christ, the Messiah, will not be one who steps over the weak to get to the strong. He will not be one who goes after those people with the best resumes. He will not be one who will entertain likely candidates only. The Messiah will give equal opportunity to all of us, even when we could be characterized as a bruised reed or a dimly burning wick. In this scheme of justice, the playing field is level for all concerned.

Even in the time of Isaiah the prophecies about the coming of Jesus Christ were geared toward expanding awareness. Not only would the long hoped for Messiah come. But he would stand for equal opportunity and for justice.

But suddenly, as Isaiah makes the point that the Messiah will stand for equal opportunity, he shifts and begins talking about how God has called people in righteousness. The Jews understood this to mean that God had called them, the Jews, in righteousness, and that they, the people of God, called in righteousness, would await the Messiah. But then Isaiah says, "I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

For the people of Israel that was eye opening. It was an awareness expanding statement or an epiphany. It was revelation that God's call is more wide ranging than just the Jews. God's call was to humans: to the Jews, the Samaritans, the Egyptians, the Africans, the Europeans, to tax collectors, shepherds, and others. Isaiah goes on to proclaim how God had called the people, taken them by the hand, and kept them so that they could be a light to the nations. So, for those who heard Isaiah's words it was mind opening, awareness building. It was an epiphany. It was an epiphany that the Messiah would come in the first place. It was an epiphany that he would stand for equal access. It was an epiphany that the activity of God was not just about God caring for the people of Israel. It was about all the nations, all people.

For our own time, as we are able to appreciate the call of God in Isaiah's time, we get an indication at how wide and deep God's call is to us. We get a look at how much God values us, cherishes us, and loves us as his people. We get an intimate picture of how God has called us, taken us by the hand and kept us.

And that would be a good place to end the sermon. But Isaiah is not done. And true to awareness expanding, in another sweeping transition, Isaiah moves from the intimate picture of God loving us to the desperately important work that God has for all of us who are called, to do.

We hear Isaiah quoting God when he says, "I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison, those who sit in darkness."

If you just read the Isaiah reading once, you can just about count on being numbed out. It is just too much to begin to grasp in one reading. But if you take your time and realize the words are meant to be spoken, or read, more than once, then, eventually you come away with a comprehensive picture. The coming of Jesus fit into how he had been anticipated by the Jews. His coming fit into the

words of the prophet Isaiah. But in the prophecy and in his coming

it was an ever expanding truth.

And so it is for us in our day. The coming of Jesus Christ into our lives fits into our hopes and expectations. But his coming is always an expanding, awareness building event. It is an epiphany. Hopefully we realize that the coming of Jesus Christ, his Baptism, his work of justice/equal opportunity, the fact that we have been called, kept, loved, and commissioned to do desperately important work all fits together. Jesus and his life and work toward justice, and we who are called, kept, loved and commissioned. They fit together.

Sometimes it seems that our lives in Christ are very quiet. And we spend time quietly discerning our call and place in this life. At times in our lives we encounter an insight that sheds light on the next step for us as followers. At times we get an indication of God's abiding love for us, and of how much we are valued by God. Did you ever stop to realize that part of your own preciousness is that you have been kept to this moment. In your life you have been cared for, kept, and sustained because of the expanding value of who you are and what you do. Doesn't that kind of take your breath away? Through the baptismal lens of Epiphany I can see a spiritual giant who works and hopes, prays, and works for integrity and love

everywhere. And yet, when I turn the lens around and look through it from the other side, I see someone shopping for groceries, going to the post office, and brushing their teeth. Who is this spiritual giant who is called to the nations for truth and justice? Who is this one who sweeps the floor and drives a care? She or he is you and me.

It is in Epiphany that we are called again to remember that. We are called again to remember that in Christ regular old you and me are called to astonishing power, love and service.

And we realize that the life and work of Jesus is inseparably bound to our lives and work. We realize that his mission and our call are intimately related.

As surely as God sent his Son to birth in Bethlehem, God has called you into life and love and service. As surely as God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt into the promised land, God has called St. Paul's to be the church here in Grinnell.

As a church we face some big decisions about physical modifications and the cost of construction. But, as I look out at the spiritual giants that make up this church, I know that somehow we will get done what needs to get done.

And yet Isaiah spoke of the humanity of all of us when he spoke of

the bruised reed or a dimly burning wick. Do you feel that you are a dimly burning wick or that you are a bruised reed? How can a bruised reed be a spiritual giant? How can a baby be the Messiah?

On the other end, sometimes I think we lose sight of the fact that we are just human. We forget that we need to be loved and love. We forget that we need the compassion and understanding of others. And we need to be compassionate and understanding of others. We forget to do kind things for ourselves and for each other. Sometimes we get lost in our work and ministry and forget that God's loving us is as much a certainty as his call to do ministry.

But we also lose sight of the big picture that Isaiah so beautifully paints here. We lose sight of Jesus and his life. We lose sight of God's keeping and loving us. We lose sight of our desperately important work. Sometimes it is jarring to realize that in God's picture, the big picture, there is so much more to each of us than we will allow.

Somewhere, some time, long ago, God called your name. In your becoming a person, in your life and work here, God has kept you, to this moment, for a reason, for your value, for your preciousness, for your service.

Are you a dimly burning wick. I know about that, for I am one of

the dimmest. Are you a bruised reed, welcome to the club.

When you read, digest, and incorporate Isaiah's words today, then finally we know something more about the life and work of Jesus.

We know more about God's calling us, keeping us, and loving us.

We know more about the work, the ministry we are to do.

Then we are more aware of the depth and richness of our lives in Christ. Then we are more able to appreciate the call to ever expanding awareness in this Epiphany.

Then we are better able to give ourselves to an ever widening and deepening life in Christ.

Then our hearts and our minds are more available to the One who brought us into being, the one who kept us and loved us that we might do desperately important work, the one who intends us to be a light to the nations. Amen.