

Baptismal Promises

Is 42: 1-9 & Matt 3: 13-17

1/13/08

Up to this point in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus hasn't really done all that much. So far he has been born. That's it. That's the list. Jesus doesn't even utter a word until the third chapter of Matthew. Unit now, the author of Matthew has been more concerned with what everyone else thought of Jesus. We have heard from Mary, from Joseph, from an Angel, from Herod, from the Magi, and from John the Baptist . . . but nothing from Jesus. The author has gone to great lengths to establish that Jesus will follow in the footsteps of the great Jewish Kings. Jesus will be the next Messiah or the next anointed one. Jesus lineage has even been traced back to David. And when David's name gets mentioned it is time to sit up straight and concentrate. Jesus has some mighty big shoes to fill. David is King beyond kings. Kind of an ancient Abraham Lincoln. Jesus will have to do a lot in order to live up to David.

Which is why verse 17 caught me almost by surprise as I read and reread the passage for today. "And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" Really? ... He hasn't even done anything yet. When was the last time you got promoted before your first day of work? Or did you ever receive a grade for a class before you handed in any homework? Do you pay the dry cleaners before they clean your clothes? Do you tip the wait staff before the food arrives? Typically, blessing and praise is held and reserved until a task is completed. Potential might be admired, but it is accomplishment that is valued.

This is not the case with God. With God the potential is valued every bit as much as the accomplishment. The potential is blessed. As soon as Jesus emerges from the Jordan, before he could do anything else, the Spirit of God descends upon Jesus and God makes the blessing known. If Jesus is to be the next David then it is important that his ministry be blessed before he even begins. God knows the potential. And so it is with us as well. Immediately, before we can do anything else the Spirit of God descends upon us and we are reminded that God is pleased with us. God is pleased with our potential.

Just recently in one of my classes we were discussing various titles for Jesus when one of the students asked if the professor could explain what exactly the title 'Son of God' meant. So we all sat back and braced ourselves for the long drawn out explanation. I had already gotten out my pen so I could doodle the time away. The professor without missing a beat answered by looking around the room and saying "Daughter of God, Son of God, Daughter of God, Son of God." I looked around the room and I could see light bulbs going off above people's heads. The answer was so clear and obvious and profound that I never got the time to doodle. It is title of blessing. It denotes prominence. It shows sanctity. But it is not exclusive. And it is through the act of baptism that we reach back throughout history and join in community with all those that have come before and all those throughout the world, and remind ourselves that yes, we too are children of God. Yes we too have endless potential. And Yes, we too have an impact that will reach beyond our own lifetimes.

This is an understanding of original blessing. Realizing that we are already loved and blessed by God, helps to equip us to live out God's vision for the world. In the face of personal adversity God's blessing reminds us to hold out some hope. Up against systems that never seem to change God's blessing gives us courage. And when we find ourselves trapped by animosity and greed God's blessing encourages us to seek forgiveness and compassion.

Reassured of God's blessing and confident in ourselves we can begin to see ourselves as the servant the prophet Isaiah speaks of. We can begin to see this church, this community gathered today as the agents for God's justice described in Isaiah 42.

These are my servants,
 The ones I have blessed
I have chosen them,
 It is with them that my soul finds delight
I have put my spirit upon them
 And it is they who will bring forth justice to the nations

Filled with the assurance of my love,
 They will not cry or lift up their voices in anger
Moved by my mercy,
 They will not break the bruised reed
 They will not add suffering to those in pain
 A dimly burning wick they will not quench
My beloved will faithfully bring forth justice

Empowered by living water,
 They will not grow faint or be crushed until they have established justice on Earth
All the world longs for the righteousness I will show through them.

Thus 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:

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,
 I have seen what you are capable of
 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
It is you whom I am trusting to do my work.
 It is you whom I am trusting to put right, that which has been made wrong.

I am the Lord, that is my name;
 My glory I give to no other,
 Nor my praise to idols.

See, the former things will come to pass and the new things I now declare,
Before the spring forth, I tell them to you
Because in you I see great things.

These are the things God call us to do. This is the potential God sees within us. The injustices in society have not yet come to pass, those accomplishments have not yet been achieved. But today we pause. We take a deep breath, close our eyes, plug our noses and let the waters of Baptism flow over us. We let them surround us and embrace us. As though we are settling down warm bath to sooth our aching joints and muscles. We let this water soak into our very beings until our fingers are wrinkly and we drip with blessing. We do this because we know, that within these waters we will find God's anointing touch. We will find God's love. And we will discover that God loves us not for our accomplishments but for our potential. And immediately, just as we emerge from the waters, before we even have a chance to accomplish our tasks we will see that God has descended upon us and we will know that God is pleased with us.