

Epiphany I
Mt 3.13-17
January 13, 2008
Fr. Sanderson

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In his sermon last Sunday, Fr. Lawrence spoke about the journey of the Magi... a journey that was physically rigorous and spiritually challenging.
...A journey likely to be misunderstood and ridiculed. Following a star, for heaven's sake! Who ever heard of such a thing!

But I would suggest to you that the journey of the Wise Men was a small thing indeed compared to the spiritual journey of Our Lord. We are not many days past hearing news of his birth... angels and shepherds; wise men and angry kings... we heard it all.

And if there had been two Sundays in the Christmas Season this year, we would have gotten to hear of his journey to the Jerusalem Temple when he was about twelve years old...

And after that, scripture is silent. Not a word. Mark's Gospel doesn't even mention a word before his baptism. What happened in the 18 or so year gap?

Well I think it would be a fairly good assumption to believe that he heard a few things! It is very logical that Mary and Joseph would have shared with the child Jesus the unusual and mysterious circumstances of his birth... of his holy calling. He was brought up under the law. He was faithful. He prayed. He knew that the hand of God was upon him... but what kind of calling was it? How was he to undertake it?

The Book of Hebrews tell us that because Jesus suffered every aspect of the human condition, he was able to sympathize with our human frailty... and having lived a life as fully human as ours, he is able to be the pioneer and "perfecter" of our faith.

Since that is the case, it is appropriate to understand that Jesus lived, in his humanity, with the same ambiguities you and I face. Sometimes, we have to wait on God. Sometimes, we have to be patient in the silent pauses.

And so it was with Our Lord. And while he waited, he became well- acquainted with the ordinariness of life... of work and sweat... of joy and grief.

And in the fullness of God's Providence, he heard the voice of the Father say to Him... Now is the time.

And so he went to his kinsman John. And he went to the Jordan River.

Both were highly symbolic. John was the prophet of Repentance. Jesus was to offer himself, even in innocence, as the sacrifice for human sin.

The Jordan was saturated with the history of Israel. In stepping into that stream, Our Lord identified himself with his people. Literally, immersing himself in all that they were, had been and could be... He entered the water to baptize it... to make it holy. And to invite us evermore to join him in its saving grace.

And as he was Baptized...the voice of the Father spoke, This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.

The Eastern Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann says that it is a beautiful image of the Trinity: The Father above us, the Son beside us, and the descending Spirit in between.

Now we know that after his Baptism, Jesus was compelled into the wilderness and there faced

temptation... but that is the sermon for the first Sunday in Lent...

For the moment, we will simply remember that Jesus was faced with many competing voices. There were many popular conceptions of what a "Messiah" was supposed to be. He could easily have listened to the crowd, if he had wanted to be "popular". But he wasn't interested in being popular, He was interested in being faithful. What kind of Messiah did the FATHER want him to be? Listening to any voice but the Father's would have made him inauthentic...and ultimately, a failure.

Have you ever known anyone who became what others expected of them rather than being true to their calling?

Not long ago, Fiona and I listened to someone about whom we care a great deal relate that his professional career has been a great disappointment to him... and that what he really wanted to do decades ago was go to art school... but he was given no support in that. Everyone told him it was impractical...etc.

And so now, bound as he is to the economic realities of mortgages and tuition bills, he trudges off day after day into a world that is not satisfying.

Another story that some of you have heard me tell before comes from Fr. Ladson Mills, a former priest of this diocese. Fr. Mills was trying to make the point to his vestry that the previous rector was so emotionally insecure that the vestry and congregation had gotten in the habit of manipulating him to get what they wanted. It was easy to do, because the poor priest would do anything in order to be liked. It was pitiful, really. To break this cycle of dysfunction, Fr. Mills looked each vestry member in the eye and said, Look guys, since the day I was born, my grandmother propped me on her knee and told me everyday that nobody was smarter or better looking than me. And when she died, she left me all her silver and all her money... so I don't need your love!

I think it is a funny story. But it also illustrates the tragic consequences that occur when people try to be who they aren't. When we live lives that are inauthentic, we give power to others... and they can lead us by the nose wherever the wish.

The point of today's Gospel is that Jesus was obedient to his calling...and he expects no less from us. And that being obedient to this calling, living authentically in him is hugely liberating. We are freed from what others think. Our dignity and worth come not from the arbitrary standards set by this sinful and fallen world, but from God Himself!

Look Father, look on His anointed Face, and only look on us as found in Him.

The Father spoke, and identified His only Begotten as the Beloved Son... the anointed One... the Messiah.

And what Jesus is by nature, you and I have become by grace and adoption.

Jesus has given us the privilege... indeed the audacity...of calling God "Father"...

Tell me, brothers and sisters, could there be a more startling epiphany than to turn our faces towards the mirror of eternity, and see not our sinful visage... but the very face of God?

+++Amen