

Epiphany 1 2019 (Baptism of the Lord)
St. Brendan's Anglican Church
Rev. Doug Floyd

Crowds press in to hear the thundering prophet. Crowds press in to see the man aflame. Crowds press in to see the long-awaited one: The Christ, the Messiah, The Promise made manifest. But John is only a voice calling, a finger pointing to another who step out from the shadows of time to be baptized into the history of his people. Even as he baptizes Jesus with water, the Father baptizes His Son in the Spirit, inaugurating His ministry, His mission, His path through Israel, through human sin and death, to the cross and to the hope of life eternal. As the Son steps into the water, he takes his first step toward joy that awaits beyond the cross.

The heavens open, the Spirit descends, the Father proclaims, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." We see this glorious moment in retrospect through the stories of Luke, of Matthew, of Mark. This moment of Triune glory seems hidden to the crowds in search of a Messiah. They have eyes but do not see. They have ears but do not hear.

Jesus has come with the blessing of the Father as a covenant for the people and a light for the nations. He will open the eyes that are blind and ears that are deaf. He bring out the prisoners from the dungeon. And lead captivity captive even as he leads Jews and Gentiles to His Father and the eternal communion of love.

Today we celebrate the beginning of Jesus's ministry. Today we rejoice that in Christ the heavens are opened, the glory is poured out on man, woman, Jew, Gentile, rich, and poor. Those who are far off have been brought near in Christ. A new story is being told. A new beginning has begun. The long-awaited promise given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is now made manifest and will be carried from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

We have been caught up in the promise of God. We have been caught up in the blessing that continues to extend to those high and low, to those near and far. Even as we are caught up in this great gathering of unlikely disciples, we are sent to help gather others to the heart of God's loving communion.

Scripture bears witness to the Father's blessing that reaches from the cradle of the human story to the end of all things. This blessing for all ages is fully manifest in Christ Jesus and made real in our midst. At the same time, we can look back to the very seed of ancient Israel and see the Lord preparing a way.

Consider Jacob wandering on the far side of the desert in Canaan. His very name is Jacob or heel and his very birth communicate the grasping of the heel. Even as he grabbed his brother's heel in childbirth, he continues to grab his brother's birthright and his brother's blessing.

At face value, Jacob appears to be a conniver and a trickster. Yet, God has called this boy from birth to bear the blessing that will heal the nations. Jacob's father sends him away. Sends him back to Haran to find a wife among his mother's people. And he goes.

He came to a certain place and a certain spot and stayed there because the sun had set. Jacob is simply following the path before him. This is about like any of us driving on a trip and deciding

it's gotten too late to drive, so we pull over for the night and find a hotel or in Jacob's case a rock to sleep on.

One moment he is sleeping and the next moment he is standing before the very gate of heaven. The sky breaks open, and angels ascend and descend on a stairway before him. The Lord, our Lord, stands beside him and speaks and blesses him. Jacob took the blessing from his Father. Now the Heavenly Father is freely blessing Jacob. No conniving, no grabbing the heal, the gracious gift of God.

"I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. ¹⁴ Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. ¹⁵ Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Ge 28:13-15)

The Lord takes hold of the man who grabs the heal. This man, this Jacob names this place Bethel, the dwelling place of God. He sets up a stone of remembrance, an Ebenezer, a marker of God's blessing in his life and his world. Though he will continue to strive with man and God, Jacob will become the very embodiment of God's blessing.

Years later when he meets his brother Esau, he no longer takes but gives. He showers wealth upon Esau and honor. He bows before his brother seven times and blesses him with the very blessing of God. Years later, Jacob will bless Pharaoh and all the nations through the wisdom and provision of his son Joseph. By the end of his life, God has transformed the Jacob the grabber of the heal to Israel the giver of God's blessings to the world.

Just as Jacob was transformed by the word of blessing from taker to giver, from striver to blesser, we are being transformed. In our weaknesses, the very strength and goodness of God is being revealed for the world. Like Jacob, we might take time to remember the blessings of God upon us and through us. We might set up an Ebenezer, a stone of remembrance.

When Jesus comes, this blessing is fully manifest, fully realized. In his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus brings the fullness of blessing to all nations through his servants, his people. In today's second lesson, we see Peter taking the blessing from the Jews to the Gentiles.

The Lord speaks to Cornelius, a God-fearing centurion and tells him to send men to Joppa in search of Peter. At the same time, Peter is staying with Simon the tanner. This type of work had a terrible odor and tanner's often lived at the outskirts of the city near the water to use the breeze from the water in the drying process. We don't know why Peter is staying with the tanner, but is interesting that Peter is staying at the margins of the city when he has series of experiences compelling him to go beyond the margins to the outside, to the unclean Gentiles.

Peter has a vision where he is compelled eat unclean food and three times he hears a voice saying, "What God has made clean, do not call common." (Ac 10:15). While he is still puzzling over this vision, the men from Cornelius arrive, seeking for Peter. He shows hospitality to these Gentiles, and then the following day goes with them to the house of Cornelius. Peter is compelled by the Spirit of the Lord to fellowship with the Gentiles, the common, the unclean.

The blessing of God poured out through Jacob is now articulate. That is now the blessing has become the Good News of Great Joy. Peter preaches good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all). (Ac 10:36). He proclaims “Jesus, who filled with the Spirit of Power, goes about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.” (Ac 10:38). This same spirit of power rests on Peter’s word and falls upon the Gentiles and they speak in tongues and worship the Lord.

Just as Peter was sent to the margins and even beyond what he thought was the margins, we are being sent out to places and people who are far off, who are unclean, who are stuck in prison, who are bound in chains, who are struggling in pain and weakness. We are sent with the word of Jesus Christ and the blessing of God which overcomes the evil one, heals the broken, opens blind ears, and leads people into the light of God’s love.

This morning we celebrate the blessing of God revealed in Jesus the King. In his baptism, He is commissioned and sent out with the fullness of blessing first promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This is the blessing of restoring communion with God, the gate of heaven is now open and we can worship our Lord and know his love.

In Christ, we ourselves become bearers of this blessing. Like Jacob, we are being changed by the blessing of God. Like Peter, we are being sent out with this blessing. We become the blessing of God for the world. When we gather in worship, we this proclaim His Good News in song, Scripture and prayer. We remember His blessing by eating the body and drinking the blood. We receive the blessing of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Finally, we are sent out with the blessing of God for the nations.

Today, even as we pray for the community and for sick and for the hurting, we are extending the very blessing of God to the world around. And the Lord himself is speaking and praying through us, and through us is gathering the exiles to himself.