

Epiphany of the Lord (January 6)

ISAIAH 60:1-6

PSALM 72:1-7, 10-14

EPHESIANS 3:1-12

MATTHEW 2:1-12

Baptism of the Lord

ISAIAH 42:1-9

PSALM 29

ACTS 10:34-43

MATTHEW 3:13-17

January 8, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Trouble with the Learning Curve!

As early as childhood, as we attentively listened to our parents tell the most noteworthy epic stories from the Bible at bedtime, wide eyed and spell bound with our amazed fascination as we carefully learned some very valuable lessons, we quickly learned to revere the heroic characters whose adventures were as exciting as they were mysterious, larger than life. Their over-the-top lives were supposedly exemplary, serving as the best role models for our behavior, mentors for our belief and faith. As children, we did not question motives, nor did we have any reason, any need whatsoever, to do so. To protect us and to help establish our faith journey into adolescence and adulthood, we understandably never got the full story, the rest of the story, that these same heroic figures more often than not had feet of clay. We knew that the young shepherd David slew the evil, wicked Philistine Goliath with a single bullseye from his trusty slingshot, a weapon the shepherd used to protect his priceless flock. It was presented as a larger-than-life event, only coming to one day realize that a slingshot was and is a serious weapon in the hands of a skilled marksman and that Goliath was nothing more than a very big man, not a colossal freak of nature. His description was merely embellished, exaggerated, Bible speak! We were not privy to the fact that David, this “man after God’s own heart,” was a murdering thug who conspired to have his coerced mistress’ husband Uriah killed at the front on the battlefield after

coercing Bathsheba into an adulterous relationship, after learning that she was inconveniently with child! Bathsheba was subsequently blamed in perpetuity as the ultimate seductress, David exonerated as a passive participant, as an innocent bystander who could not help himself and really had no choice. Now, today, many if not most would condemn his actions, wanting him to get a life sentence or a death sentence for this egregious behavior. We laud his successor, King Solomon, the wisest of the wise, ignoring the fact that he was a major manipulator who circled his wagons, consolidating his power wielded at the expense of his potential rivals, dooming his adversaries to their demise, just like any despot, any manically paranoid leader. How quickly we forget the murdering rampage of Paul against Jesus' followers during his Pharisaical years, quickly forgiving this Jewish proselyte upon his dramatic conversion to the way of Jesus, all suddenly well, everything okay. **We never wanted to rock the boat, to stir the pot, to make these literary complexities into an uncomfortable dilemma, our uncomfortable dilemma. We just wanted to make things simple, especially the Bible as it lauded its richly captivating personalities, all described with the greatest adjectival flattery as they fulfill what we were taught to perceive to be their divinely inspired roles.**

My reason for bringing what may be a disconcerting conversation to our attention this morning is that today we read what appears to be a rather benign narrative, a lection that is naturally presented in a positive manner for a Sunday worship service. In this story from the Book of Acts we read a brief part of a larger narrative telling the story of the somewhat awkward encounter between the apostle Peter and the gentile Roman Centurion of the Italian Cohort named Cornelius, including what appeared to be a rather large extended family, all who had gathered for the big event, to hear some very exciting news, what amounted to a most troubling encounter for Peter, yes, a what he knew would be a bit uncomfortable meet and greet. Yes, today we explore a chink in Peter's armor, a flaw in his ointment! Of course, this certainly is not the first time we have encountered the Rock's many recorded foibles! I wonder how many went unnamed! Any time we read only a partial text, only a portion, from a larger narrative, as we are forced to do in a worship service, we start from behind, are in trouble from the start. But if we further peel back the proverbial textual onion in the Christian scriptures, we discover, much to our dismay, that there is even more to this story than this story. There is always more to Bible stories than the

stories! You see, among the disciples, evidently Peter was one of the last remaining holdouts, clinging desperately to a long held traditional Judaism even as he embraced the way of Jesus, diligently and desperately seeking to follow in the worthy footsteps of the rabbi. I am reminded of Hall and Oates hit song from 1981, "I Can't Go for That," because Peter drew his line in the sand, declared his no-fly zone, when it came to breaking bread and fully embracing Gentiles into the newly minted, now emerging and evolving Christian fold. Despite three adventuresome years with Jesus, somehow Peter failed to get it, failed to get the memo, failed to grasp it, continuing to dig in his heels as a narrow believer, even coming off as a religious bigot, a spiritual separatist, a proud faithful segregationist. He would have none of it! Let me state clearly, however, that there is always a danger in preaching the Bible, specifically the Christian scriptures, when naming this historic Jewish/Christian conflict. In today's toxic climate, damningly shadowed by a tidal wave ever rising, yes, a tsunami, of antisemitism, we must acknowledge that this pivotal issue from back in the day was not about Judaism per se, but provides a broader a commentary on any religion that pulls rank, any zealot whose adherents believe their faith perspective is superior, the only way to God and to be and do as a religious, spiritual, person! These conjectures are in no way intended to be antisemitic despite their tone. Yes this sidebar must be acknowledged! Period! There, I feel better! This conversation is much deeper, more complicated, than a simple matter of a Jew snubbing a Gentile! It cannot be reduced to that inane level of a pedestrian argument! That assertion would be a nonstarter for any reasonable discussion or dialogue. Today's lesson provides the immediate occasion, Peter's personal problem, not the overarching issue, religious arrogance and even intolerance, that is at stake!

On that fateful day on which he was literally forced by the Spirit to enter the home of a Gentile as he encountered all Cornelius' clan, Peter, no doubt still shaken by his dream in which a sheet was lowered before him laden with every unclean animal imaginable, with the caveat, "Kill and eat," Peter began his apology tour by declaring for one and all, clarity being the operative word, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Yes, even now! Yes, even now, at this point in time, this point in the game! Yes, Peter at this date still

proudly referred to himself as a Jew and not in a way that was gracious and inclusive, graciously inclusive! No, Peter was revealing something about himself, a position he maintained even after living with Jesus for three years, wearing his Judaism on his sleeve as a badge of honor, a symbol of prestige, privilege, piety, even power. Ironically, Peter was maintaining, nurturing, the very issues that was plaguing the faith tradition of his birth, the very things Jesus sought to expose and eradicate from a faith to which he remained faithful, true throughout his life, in solidarity to the end. The problem was not that Peter desired to remain Jewish, the problem was that he did not really want outsiders to come to the party! Peter wanted a double standard, a different covenant, a separate set of rules! Peter wanted to maintain distinctions! He needed qualifiers, explanatory caveats! He did not seek to hide or nuance his flawed and losing position! Yes, his viewpoints were subtle except when they were not, when it was obviously, transparently blatant, far more than semantics!

A little background to flavor our homiletical soup today! When the early leaders of the fledgling Church met for a meeting of the minds, the early summit at Antioch, the place where the term Christian was first coined, the gathering turned into a fiasco, highlighted, or lowlighted, by the literal faceoff, a smackdown between Paul, the hero who in his own mind saves the day, and Peter, the stubbornly snobbish villain. These giants of the fledgling faith also happened to be two giant egomaniacs, their inflated hubris fully on display, butting heads in what had to be a show for the ages. The back story of Peter's struggles is fully exposed in the Pauline epistles. Of course, Paul's perspective, his one-sided version is all we have! In fairness to Peter, he might have a different tale to tell! Assuming Paul's legitimacy, his accuracy as he recounted the troublesome events, yes, it was a matter of right and wrong, one right and the other wrong. There was no gray area, no middle ground, no solution by compromise, if indeed these Pauline reports paint an accurate picture, are historically factual. There was Paul, who had freely engaged and welcomed Gentiles from all over the ancient world, missionary evangelist extraordinaire, and there was Peter, the "Rock," the thrice denier, who might have allowed those of gentile persuasion into the room but certainly did not want them at table at the Agape Feast that accompanied these early services of worship, dining together as one with Jewish brothers and sisters, siblings all, sharing a

meal that would have breached all the proper protocols of Kosher ritual cleanliness. Gentiles may have converted and may have been baptized but they were still Gentiles and thus they were of the wrong birth, the wrong clan, having the wrong lineage, yes, an inferior heritage. Gentiles were inherently unclean, deemed so by God, the embodiment of people pollution, and no words from Jesus would ever change that, the Jews deemed clean by the same God! The irony is that Peter had once been on board with gentile inclusiveness but now, seemingly under peer pressure, was having second thoughts, reverting to his pre-hospitable, law over grace, Levitical, inclinations. In the south, we call that “crawfishing,” because these tasty crustaceans swim backwards! The complexities were multifaceted indeed, challenging beliefs and practices long held and observed! Peter reveals a long-standing bias and prejudice, often a necessary position for the ancient Hebrews’ oft fragile survival.

In Galatians we read this sordid tale, a story revealing an inflection point for the young Church still diligently trying to gain traction in a competitively multicultural, multireligious, world. Would it continue to practice a hierarchical exclusivism, making allowances for Gentiles but stipulating that they remain somewhere beyond the premier confines of Christian inner circles, places solely reserved for traditional Jewish converts, in other words, those who had been circumcised, an ancient rite that many believed needed to be a contemporary Christian practice. It was a kerfuffle based in a major conflicted conundrum. Now, that is something you never want to see! I am always reminded when I read these stories exposing the Church’s struggle to expand beyond its proprietary, sectarian, boundaries, that Jesus too faced the same, exact, dilemma. There was a time in his life when the young rabbi believed that his message was to be exclusively delivered, an insularly sectarian word, not only to be proclaimed first to the Jews, but that it was to be only, solely, exclusively, preached and taught to his own, a completely closed constituency. Remember that fateful story when Jesus is confronted by a Canaanite or Syrophoenician woman, yes, a gentile on steroids we might say, this proudly calculating self-acknowledged “dog” only desiring a healing for her daughter, not even daring to assume to desire that as a misinformed pagan she might be invited to become a part of Jesus’ version of the ancient household of faith. On that day Jesus had his comeuppance, his conversion, that, as with Peter, was surely a rude awakening,

a revelation that shocked him to his core. Yes, even Jesus had to learn, to discover, that everybody means everybody, all the time, every time! The crucial part of today's Witness from the Christian scriptures in the book of Acts is one simple phrase uttered by Peter as he made his surprising, surprising discoveries, "I really am learning . . ." He was "really learning" "that God does not show partiality to one group of people over another." The operative word here is "learning!" Peter, just like Jesus once upon a time on a certain fateful day, discovered a steep learning curve! Learning is the necessary baseline for us all. Without a modicum of education of the most basic varieties, we can never change, never grow, never evolve! Jesus, Peter, Paul, and the rest, are a, pardon the pun, lesson to us all! Yes, we are to go and do likewise! Ignorance is never an excuse when it comes to personal, familial, or societal arrogance when relating to others, name them one by one, to misuse an old gospel song image! And so very often, our understandings only come through the proverbial school of hard knocks! Being inclusively welcoming, being radically hospitable, was a discovery that came as not only a shock, but a significant challenge to Peter even as it did to Jesus, and I am certain was equally difficult for the remainder of the twelve and the rest of his merry band of primarily Jewish followers. If that is so, then why do we ever think that being "extravagantly welcoming," expansively inclusive, radically hospitable, and vulnerably open should or would come as an easy thing for us, an easy step to make. The thrust of Epiphany of the Lord, highlighted by the arrival of the wise Magi, gentile orientation inferred, is the absolute invitation to all people, no matter! That is why the subtitle for this high and holy festival is "The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles!" Game! Set! Match! End of discussion!

Among human beings, that would be us, a species that just as with every other animal seeks survival at all costs, that clings to the familiarity and comfort zones of tribe and clan, this dynamic unfortunately frequently defining the human experience teaches us that breaking out of our insular shells is never an easy thing to do nor a characteristic of our humanity to never be taken lightly. We assume at our own risks. It is hard to give up our positions, our prestige, our privilege, our priorities, our power! Our intractable politics is an excellent, but only one such example! Even when we are not aware, we are always holding to our biases, our stereotypes, our prejudices. Yes, perhaps sadly, it is human

nature, in our very DNA. That is why we need to rely on and lean into the spark of the Divine, the *imago Dei*, the very image of God deeply imbued, engrained, within every human being, mirroring, a reflection of the God who uniquely created each and every one of us, the Holy and Christly Spirit stamped upon us, an imprimatur of the Holy housed within us as the tie that binds. It is the holy thing we all hold in common when we allow holy presence to persuade, to impact, to dominate, our being. Folks, relationships, relationships of all kinds, every stripe, are difficult, fragile, hard to manage.

When we fully look at much of Peter's outspoken career as a disciple, what we see is often a human dumpster fire, a muddled mess, inconsistencies and trials by fire, a "Rock" who often sank, getting it wrong much of the time. In other words, when we are honest with ourselves and with one another, he is a lot like us. The good news is that we are privy to the big, larger than life, picture of Peter and know that the outcome for him and for the Church he sought to build was good, positive in so many ways. The jump from traditional Judaism to a Jewish Christianity that could not hold those two colossal but competing images, was rough edged, messy in every way, quite frankly impossible, creating a schism that has lasted for centuries, including some very horrific antisemitic outcomes. This is our unfortunate heritage, our stained legacy, but this is our lot, the reality into which the Church was born, continuing to be full of all the circumstance and situations that challenge us, not only in relating to the faith of our forebears, but every individual and corporate relationship that ever appears on our radar. It is as much an impediment as it is an opportunity. **Today's postmodern Church, including every church on the planet, including our own, while faced with myriad issues, will always confront one major obstacle, yes, one challenge, a hurdle, for the ages as the Bible tells us so, how we openly embrace full acceptance and affirmation over isolation or tolerance, yes, how we will engage every neighbor we encounter because every human being is our neighbor. It is a core value to our ministry and mission as local beloved faith community. Arguing otherwise not only is wrong, counterproductive, but is antithetical to the gospel and will never get any of Jesus' followers, real and imagined, those in name only, to the place where God would have us all be. Yes, to the Jew and the Greek, Gentiles, to male and female, and every other supposed opposite, Jesus has demanded that there be no difference, no distinction, no qualifiers, no ifs, ands, or buts, and that we**

be one and that we act like it, live like it. It is the only hope for humanity, faithful or not!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and calls us to learn of one another, drawing us together as one as different as we always are and thankfully will always be! Amen and amen.