

Baptism of the Lord – Year B 2008

1. On January first I was flying to LA to do a wedding.
 - a. Over the Arizona desert,
 - b. I saw the ground open up underneath the plane.
 - i. It was the Grand Canyon
 - ii. Cutting through the desert for miles in each direction.
2. I have always marveled at the fact that the Grand Canyon was caused by the Colorado River.
3. As I looked down however,
 - a. I noticed that the bottom of the canyon was not only filled with water,
 - b. But with trees and other plants.
 - c. And that the water,
 - i. Which had cut the desert so deeply, had also given it life.
4. When I got to LA,
 - a. While the news was filled with the upcoming inauguration, the war in Gaza and Brad Pitt's mustache (Will he keep it? Won't he?)
5. One news article was widely reported there that maybe was not so big here.
6. The Episcopal Church won its lawsuit there against several congregations,
 - a. Which have split from it because of the Episcopal Church's more liberal positions concerning issues like women priests and gay bishops.
 - b. The civil court decided that the congregations can leave;
 - c. But the National Church gets to keep their buildings and property.
7. The Church leadership was celebrating this as a victory;
 - a. But not everyone was so happy.
8. I have many Episcopal priest friends.
 - a. One who blogs regularly wrote about the situation saying:
 - b. *"Churches and denominations in the U.S. and many other parts of the world have fallen so far from the call of God to be a people living out the Way of Christ. We are so caught up in socio-politics/theo-politics and our own insecurities that we demand "fact" when no such fact exists, only faith in a determined belief. We depend on this world's way of understanding and dealing with things rather than on God."*
9. His anguish at the deep wounds in the church caused me to realize that deserts are not only found in the state of Arizona:
 - a. They are found in the **lives of churches** where members rip their communities apart.
 - b. They are found in the **lives of priests and ministers**, who anguish over the ways the faith they love is misused in those fights, and wonder about their own vocations.
 - c. They are found in the **lives of whole nations** when they forget those ideals upon which they were founded, and engage in torture, rendition and war.
 - d. They are found in the **lives of individuals**; when they lose their jobs, their security, or the people they love to divorce, illness or death.
 - e. In short deserts are found wherever we are cut off from those things we trust in to give us life.
10. The people of Judah in the 6th century BC may have lived in by the rivers of Babylon;
 - a. But because the Babylonians conquered them their lives were a desert.
11. The Christians in the 1st century AD may have lived as simply as the carpenter whom they worshiped, or as richly as the emperor who ruled them.
 - a. But because the Empire persecuted them from without,
 - b. and they were as divided over what they believed

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- i. as the Episcopalians are from within, their lives were a desert.
- 12. One of those first Christians, whom we call Mark,
 - a. Remembered a man named John who lived desert.
 - b. But he lived there by choice,
 - c. And called other people out into that desert,
 - i. So that he could wash them there.
 - ii. That is what the word *baptize* means in Greek; “to wash”.
 - d. Jesus was baptized by John in the desert, according to Mark,
 - i. And for that matter, Matthew, Luke and John.
- 13. No matter how they otherwise begin their Gospels,
 - a. All four evangelists begin with the story of Jesus’ baptism.
- 14. Because something happens to Jesus at his baptism
 - a. Jesus hears God, proclaiming that He is God’s beloved Son.
 - i. And while we do not know what Jesus himself experienced at that moment
- 15. For the evangelists the meaning of Jesus’ baptism is clear;
 - a. The moment the water touches Jesus’ head,
 - i. God’s spirit “descends” upon Jesus
 - ii. And in the middle of that desert
 - 1. Reveals the deepest purpose of Jesus’ life.
- 16. If the story of Jesus’ baptism were just about Jesus,
 - a. Well then that might be the reason it is found all four Gospels.
- 17. But Mark is clear that the reason is that what happened to Jesus in his baptism
 - a. Happens to everyone else in theirs;
 - i. That baptism is with water and the spirit
 - 1. Who proclaims who we truly are
 - 2. And reveals the deepest purpose of our lives.
- 18. Of course few of us remember our baptisms.
 - a. And thus we live out our lives in the desert,
 - b. Oblivious to that moment when we were washed with the water that makes such promises.
- 19. But we are not alone;
- 20. For the prophet we call second Isaiah was there,
 - a. Writing the words we hear in this morning’s first reading
 - b. He speaks of strange things;
 - i. He speaks of a servant who will bring justice, liberty and will open the eyes of the blind.
 - c. The Church would come to understand these words as referring to the servant Jesus;
 - d. But a prophet living six hundred years before Jesus’ birth would not have meant them this way.
 - i. No, he was saying that the people of Judah living in exile in Babylon was that servant;
 - 1. And that every time they remembered that they were God’s servant,
 - 2. They returned to who they truly were as God’s people
 - 3. And rediscovered the deepest purpose of their lives.
- 21. And John was in the desert too,
 - a. Not John the Baptist but another John
 - b. Writing the words we hear in today’s second reading.
 - c. He too speaks of strange things; of water blood and spirit

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- i. He says that these things testify to who God is;
 - ii. They testify to who Jesus truly is
 - iii. And they do this so that the members of his divided and persecuted church might know
 - iv. That they were people washed in water, and touched by the spirit;
 - v. People for whom Jesus shed his blood.
 - d. In short they were Christians;
 - i. And every time they remembered their baptisms,
 1. They returned to the water that made such promises
 2. And remembered the purpose of their lives.
 3. And discovered that even their desert could become a place of life.
22. We Catholics like to think that we are safe from the divisions
 - a. That tear at other Churches like the Episcopal Church,
23. Just as we Americans once liked to think that were safe from the injustice that corrupts other nations
24. But as we have seen nothing is safe from the desert;
 - a. It creeps slowly into our churches, our nation our very lives
 - b. Whenever we begin to lose our purpose and thus forget who we truly are.
25. IN a few days our country will turn a page; we will have a new president,
 - a. And we will hear a speech in which he will undoubtedly speak of justice and liberty
 - b. He will speak of shed blood and the American spirit.
26. He will try to do what second Isaiah did for Judah
 - a. And remind us of whom we once were; so that we might be that way again.
27. We can only hope he succeeds.
28. But long before our president elect opens his mouth, the Church opens hers today;
 - a. the Episcopal Church does it with us and many others;
 - b. and she recalls Jesus' baptism as the moment
 - i. which reveals the deepest purpose of Jesus' life and thus who he truly is.
 - ii. And reminds us that our baptism does the same.
29. When I flew home from LA last Thursday, by the time we were over Arizona it was already dark.
30. The Grand Canyon was still there, cutting through the desert,
 - a. its waters making it a place of life. I just couldn't see it.
 - b. But I didn't need to; I could remember it.
31. Just like baptism.
 - a. It is there, an undeniable part of our history and life;
 - b. Never to be undone;
 - c. Calling us to follow Jesus the beloved Son,
 - d. To be God's servant
 - i. And work and pray so that justice might be done,
 - ii. Divisions healed
 - iii. and God's purpose for the world might be revealed.
 - e. Nothing, not even the desert, can separate us from the promises of our baptism.
 - f. We can only forget them, but even then they are still there waiting for us to rediscover them,
 - g. Because when that happens,
 - i. we remember that we are God's beloved daughters and sons
 - ii. we discover who we truly are.