

Weekly Reading – Monday, January 4, 2010

This is the first Sunday after Epiphany, and thus the Sunday upon which the baptism of Jesus is the gospel text. With baptism, his public ministry is launched, and this is the overall theme of the time between Epiphany and Lent: the public ministry of Jesus, his teaching, preaching and healing. The light shines forth! By linking baptism to ministry in this way, the church is helped to remember that baptism is not only incorporation into the Body of Christ, it is the ordination of us all to ministry, service to God and our neighbor. It's a good Sunday to offer the rite of Renewal of Baptismal Vows in worship.

Isaiah 43: 1 - 7

Verses of great affirmation and call from the Second Isaiah, addressed to Israel in exile, but to be heard as addressing the church and each of us who are part of it today as well. They also paint the background for the heavenly words of affirmation addressed to Jesus at his baptism. "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters (note the baptismal reference), I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you." Here water is a force of chaos, and some of the starker meanings of baptism (death) are suggested. Perhaps as we come out of the holiday season of good cheer and festivity and return to work and a new year with new challenges, it is good to hear this foundational affirmation: "You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." It seems to me suggestive that biblical Israel "passed through the waters" both to leave bondage (Egypt) and to enter the Promised Land. That is, there is time of chaos before and accompanying new life. And indeed, at birth, the onset is signaled by the "breaking of the waters."

Acts 8: 14 - 17

In some ways, a fitting text for it explores the connection between baptism and the Holy Spirit, which is key in Luke's narrative of the baptism of Jesus. In other ways, an odd choice for it is but a snippet from the larger story of Philip's mission in Samaria and the attempt Simon the magician to buy the Holy Spirit. We get none of that narrative, though it surrounds the several verses that do make up the pericope. What we do get suggests that baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit are not always linked. Acts has no rigid picture of that relationship. Sometimes the Spirit falls and then baptism takes place. Other times, as here, baptism in the name of Jesus has occurred, but the gift of the Spirit comes later. And at other times, people have mistakenly been baptized in the name of John, not Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is given when things are sorted out. If there is no formulaic or rigid relationship between baptism and the Holy Spirit in Acts, there are a couple things that are, however, clear and consistent. One is that the Holy Spirit is given, not gotten. Thus Simon's attempts to buy it, later in the story of Acts 8, are met with a harsh rebuke on Peter's part. There is no controlling God's power or selling it. Nor is the Holy Spirit the private possession of some. If there is any clear statement about the Holy Spirit in Acts, it is that this gift is given to all believers, not some who have a higher rank or role. And what do we mean by the Holy Spirit? Often today it is identified with the gift of tongues or other ecstatic forms. One can make a pretty solid argument from

Acts that the Holy Spirit is the power that God gives for people to minister in Christ's name, and to make the move from being subjects to actors and agents.

Luke 3: 15 - 17, 21 -22

Each of the four gospels has some version of the baptism of Jesus, though they vary greatly. It's useful to compare the four versions, not so much to try to do historical reconstruction, but to get a sense of the emphasis and theological points that each one makes, and here the points Luke is making. One issue that each of the gospel accounts of the baptism of Jesus is working on is the role and importance of John. With John baptizing Jesus it may seem that John is top dog. So all the gospels work to clarify that in fact John is the forerunner and subordinate. That matter is directly addressed in the first section of this text. It is also addressed in that the baptism itself (vs. 21) is never actually reported (contrast to Matthew and Mark) but only referenced. The emphasis falls rather on the descent of the Holy Spirit and the confirming voice from heaven. Here the voice speaks to Jesus in the first person (different than in Matthew). The effect of Luke's subordination of the actual baptism and shining the light on the opening of the heavens, descent of the Spirit, and heavenly voice of confirmation is to put the spotlight squarely on Jesus, who is (not incidentally) praying. The time is at hand. God's chosen one is here. The work begins, but it begins in God, powered by the Spirit. In the words spoken from the heavens there are references to Psalm 2: 7, of the coronation of the Messiah/King, and Is. 42: 1, the suffering servant of God. Jesus is both: servant and King, suffering one and Messiah, crowned and crucified. Understanding Jesus has a good deal to do with holding the tension of these conflicting images and roles and their connotations. With the second lesson from Acts and the Lucan nativity story in mind, the priority of the Holy Spirit also comes to the fore in this account. The Spirit is at work, God is at work. This ministry is a God thing. And what of our own ministries? Are they also a God thing?