

The twelve days of Christmas came to an end this past Tuesday and the season of Epiphany started on Wednesday. Epiphany is the season between Christmas and Lent in which we see the light of God shining through the life of Jesus. Last Sunday we read the gospel lesson for Epiphany Day with the star guiding the Wise Men to the child Jesus.

During this Epiphany season which lasts until Ash Wednesday, February 10th this year, I would like us to consider the blessings that we have in life. This morning, specially, let us think of about those who have blessed us by pointing out the presence of Christ in life.

A distant memory and a recent conversation brought examples to my mind of how people point to Christ in our midst. When I was in grade school I did not look forward to attending Sunday School. The biggest reason I did not like attending Sunday School was the fact I didn't know any of the kids there. I attended the Omaha Public Schools but Rockbrook United Methodist Church, that my family attended, was located in the District 66 Public Schools. Therefore, I didn't know any of the kids and was always happy when our family skipped a Sunday. Yet, I remember one year, in particular, when I really did enjoy attending Sunday School. It was in 2nd or 3rd grade. A husband and wife taught that class.

They must have noticed that I was shy and felt like an outsider. They must have lavished me with attention and took the time to make sure I felt included because I know I really liked attending that year. I can't tell you the content they taught me but I knew God loved me because of the loving care that husband and wife gave me. They pointed to the love of Jesus by their actions.

Think of those persons in your life that pointed to the presence of Christ by their actions or words. This past Tuesday I sat down with the wife, daughter and step-daughter of Joe Sacca whose funeral I presided at on Thursday. Joe had progressive lung cancer throughout the fall and died on January 3rd. He was a resident in Greenwood and had some Methodist connections over the years. His wife Susan shared with me on Tuesday some of the mystical experiences Joe had toward the end of his life while he was in the hospital. Much like Saul saw a light and heard a voice while he was on his way to Damascus in the book of Acts Joe experienced the presence of Christ in his hospital room. He saw a vision beyond our realm and he heard a voice beyond this realm that others in the room did not see or hear. It was very similar experience for those who were with Saul on the road to Damascus. Susan, Joe's wife, said that although she did not see what he saw and she did not hear what he heard she could see that it was real for Joe because of the expression on his face and the sense of calm and peace that enveloped him.

Jesus told his followers that he would send the comforter, the Holy Spirit, who would provide us with peace beyond our understanding when it is most needed in our lives. Joe had the presence of Christ in his midst as cancer was bringing his mortal life to an end. I am thankful to Susan for sharing those experiences she had with Joe and pointing to how Christ is in our midst.

This morning our gospel lesson invites us to consider how we are blessed by those who call our attention to Jesus in our midst. Think of the people in your life who by their words, actions, and attitudes remind you that Christ is present with us. It is the blessing of such people that carry on a tradition that we see with John the Baptist.

Let's review our gospel lesson from Luke this morning starting with verse 15.

“...the people were filled with expectation...”

John was at the river Jordan preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He wasn't just preaching to the wind. We are told that huge crowds from Jerusalem and all Judea and the region about the river Jordan came out to listen to the words of John. These people had large expectations as they journeyed to

see, hear, and be baptized by John. In the two centuries before the time of John the expectation of Messiah coming from the line of King David emerged among the Israelite Jews.

A thousand years earlier the prophet Nathan declared an oracle that fueled speculation regarding a future Messiah who came from the line of David (2 Samuel 7:8-17). The Jews had been under the thumb of Greek rule and now Roman rule for centuries and there were high expectations that God's Messiah was soon to arrive. Verse 15 continues,

*“and all people questioned in their hearts
concerning John, whether perhaps he is the Christ.”*

When John was speaking he was quoting from the prophet Isaiah and calling for the people to prepare themselves, through repentance, “for the salvation of God” (verse 6). The people at the river Jordan were wondering if his next announcement was that he, John, was the One to usher in the kingdom of God.

John addresses that thought among the crowds directly in verse 16 as he declares, *“I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”*

John indicates his baptism is of water and for repentance. But the One he is pointing to and the One he will be introducing is much greater than him. In fact, John says that he is not worthy even to untie the sandals of the One that he pointing to. Untying sandals was such a menial duty that it was expected only of slaves; disciples were not expected to untie their master's sandals. John, the center of attention, the superstar of his day, was contrasting his actual status in relationship to the One to come. John avoided getting caught up with an over inflated understanding of his role. He was just there to announce the arrival of the important One.

I found myself in a position with similar dynamics at the beginning of my ministry. It was when Harold Washington was running for re-election as Mayor of Chicago in 1987. His election in 1983 was historic as he was the first African American to be elected as mayor in that racial charged city. The church I was serving was in a geographically strategic location. The Alderman for our area at the time, Danny Davis who is presently serving his 11th term in Congress, asked me if Mayor Washington could address my congregation and others in the community at the church. He asked me to introduce Mayor Washington. That afternoon the television news crews from the four affiliates in town were there along with WMAQ, WGN, and WBBM radio stations that carried news in the Chicago area. Folks were inside to listen to the Mayor and an equally large group, against the Mayor, were outside. It was a quite a circus like event. With all that was happening I had to remind myself not to act like a fool who thought ‘he’ was the center of attention. My role was simply to announce the presence of Mayor and invite him to speak. John the Baptist clearly understood that his role was simply to announce the presence of the Messiah.

John notes that while he baptizes with water that the Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. What do these terms mean? John, most probably saw the Spirit and fire as means of purification for the end times. The refiner's fire was cleansing for the repentant and it was a means of destruction for the unrepentant. This understanding combines elements that fit both the historical context of John's preaching and the literary context in which the saying about the “winnowing fork” that follows. Luke, the gospel writer, may have seen the fulfillment of this saying at Pentecost (Acts 2) in ways that John could not have imagined.

Let me recap this section of our gospel lesson. While announcing the coming of the Messiah John emphasizes four ways that the Messiah will be greater than he is.

- John baptizes with water while the Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire.
- the coming One is more powerful than John
- John is not worthy to untie the sandal of the coming One
- the coming One will bring salvation for the repentant and judgment for the unrepentant

The words of John the Baptist are fulfilled through the events described in verse 21 & 22. As Jesus comes to be baptized the Holy Spirit descends upon him. A voice from heaven says to Jesus, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." The heavenly words confirm the announcement that John had previously made.

John, through direction from God, joined a grand tradition of affirming his own role in life while pointing to Jesus, the Messiah, in our midst. John the Baptist pointed to Jesus just like Mary, the mother, pointed to Jesus. Peter the fisherman pointed to Jesus. Anna the widow pointed to Jesus. Paul the tent maker pointed to Jesus. Tabitha the seamstress pointed to Jesus. This biblical list of persons, who, from their own vocation pointed to Jesus as the Messiah is just the beginning. People of faith in every form of livelihood throughout the generations have pointed to Jesus in their midst. Members of this church are blessed because we are surrounded by people whose words and actions have pointed to Jesus in our midst over the years. Take a moment and think of the people whose words, stories, actions and attitudes have pointed the way for you to understand how Christ is in our midst. Take a moment out to thank those who have pointed the way to Christ in your life.

As members of this church we are blessed in many ways. This morning our gospel lesson has helped us to consider how we are blessed by those who call our attention to the Christ presence in our midst. We are blessed by the people who carry on the inspired tradition of John the Baptist. Finally, we are invited to continue that tradition as we point out Christ in our midst through our stories, actions and attitudes. Amen.