

Epiphany

by Brian Erickson

January 11, 2009

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

The lectionary doesn't grant us much of a breather between the Christ's birth and his baptism. We move quickly from the angels' song to this camel hair-wearing, locust-eating, baptizer. But I am fascinated by the untold story, those blank pages between the manger's straw and the Jordan River. I want to know where Jesus has been.

Maybe he knew that once he left, he couldn't come back home. Maybe he was afraid, or unsure of when he was supposed to start, or how to start at all. I wonder what Mary and Joseph told him about the circumstances of his birth, or what that gold, frankincense, and myrrh were doing up on the mantle. Did they have to tell him who he was? Or did he just know? These are the things I want to know because, somehow, all those missing years, all those untold moments, lead up to this one.

The shore of the Jordan is packed with broken and bruised nobodies, waiting in line for a last chance. It looks nothing like church, and it is certainly no place for any self-respecting Messiah, but if the manger taught us anything, it is that God does not share our need for social etiquette. No one knows what Jesus heard during that time out of the spotlight, what he was taught, or what he discovered on his own. But as he makes his way along the Jordan's banks, it is obvious he knows that these nobodies are his people. This is where his journey begins.

Sure enough, as soon as his head breaks the surface and he draws that first breath after baptism, the heavens sing a new song, declaring him the Beloved. Like the Genesis reading, this is a story of creation. The water calls Christ out of his

silence. Rising out of the water, his steps have a new direction. There is a look in his eye, the look of someone who knows where he's going, where he must go.

One July Sunday in 1944, when Donald Beeler was 21, he was baptized in a tiny church in southern Indiana. I don't know much about Donald. I don't know what his career aspirations were, if he wanted to have children or start a farm or if he was in love. I don't know any of those things because just a few short months later, on February 7, 1945, on a German battlefield, Donald lost his life.

He never got the chance to become anybody. He was never famous. But one Sunday, he became a part of a family. And so the church placed Donald's name on the baptismal font, declaring for all the world that the water had made him somebody. That font now resides in our university's chapel, still taking bruised and broken nobodies and calling them beloved.

Consider yourself warned. There's something in the water.

January 15, 2009

1 Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18;
1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

The Corinthian church seems to have the opposite problem from most modern churches, namely that they were way too comfortable talking about sex.

While Paul spent two years with them starting the church, he had moved on to other mission fields, leaving the Corinthians to creatively interpret Christianity for themselves. Evidently, they had an ongoing problem with sexual immorality,

because Paul had written them about it even before the letter we know as I Corinthians, but that letter was conveniently lost. In Paul's absence, they adopted the popular theology of "Don't worry, be happy." As long as your actions don't hurt anybody else, they're fine. After all, isn't this what grace is about? Freedom in Christ?

"Sure," Paul writes. "I am free to do anything. All things are lawful," he says, "but genuine life is about more than just doing whatever you feel like." Our bodies are not meant to be treated like cheap rental houses, but temples of the Holy Spirit. Yet somehow we have inherited the very unbiblical notion that our souls are the only things that count, and that our bodies are just disposable containers. But the Psalmist is clear, "It was you who formed my inward parts, it was you who knit me together in my mother's womb." When Jesus is resurrected, he does not ascend as a cloud, or a spaceship, but as a body.

This flesh and bone is who we are. It is part of God's covenant with us. And when we try to destroy it by overeating or undereating, keeping it numb with drugs and alcohol, by idolizing others' bodies or compulsively sculpting our own, we have missed the point altogether. Faith is not just some mental assent—it's what you do, what you eat, what you say. It's how you treat your neighbor and how you treat yourself. "Your faith lives in this body of yours, and that means that your bodies are members of Christ," Paul says.

We believe in a God who wore our skin. Who got blisters on his feet. Who felt pain and got goosebumps. We proclaim the Word-become-flesh, a God who thinks enough of flesh to dwell on earth, and to leave a tomb empty on Easter morning. A God who thinks enough of flesh to build a body of Christ here on earth with folks like you and me, flesh and bone.

This time after Epiphany is not just about discovering who Christ is. It is meant to shed light on who we are becoming in Christ. "You are not your own," Paul writes, "You were bought with a price." In the shadow of this incarnate Savior, may we in the pulpit have the audacity to proclaim a faithfulness that is lived out both physically and spiritually.

January 25, 2009

Jonah 3:1-5, 10; Psalm 62:5-12;
1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

Today's Old Testament reading says this is the "second time" the word of God comes to Jonah. The first time God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, he packs his bags and heads the other way, hoping to hide, but ending up in the belly of that infamous fish. It is right after being spit out on the beach that Jonah hears the Word again, with the same instructions: "Go to Nineveh and tell them I am going to destroy their city, because of their sin."

This is a typical prophetic message. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos—most every prophet ends up proclaiming bad news. Jonah wanders across the city, preaching that the city is about to fall. Standard prophetic procedure. It never works. Nobody ever listens.

Except this time.

The king tells his people to repent, to change their ways, hoping that God will forgive them. And they did. So, God changes God's mind (3:10). God decides against destroying the city.

Instead of this making him happy, Jonah is infuriated by God's change of heart: "This is why I fled the first time, God—I knew you would do something like this. You're always doing stuff like this. Just go ahead and kill me. It would be better to die—those folks deserved what was coming to them!"

It's not that Jonah is afraid of working for God. He runs the other way because he knows that to follow God means that he will have to follow God—to accept God's way of doing things in the world, which doesn't always line up with our own plans.

We tend to idealize the calls of the prophets, disciples, and other biblical characters, because we all yearn to be that close to God, to have that kind of clarity. What we forget is that the call is never the whole story. We forget that for the disciples, and for Jonah, and for all of us, faithfulness is taking step after step after step. God has a call for anyone who will listen, but it may not be the calling you were looking for.

As a culture, we are obsessed with moments, but the life of faith is a life, not just a moment. We can fantasize all we want about the instances in which the disciples and the prophets are called by God, but those moments are never the whole story. Even Judas says yes at first. The measure of discipleship is not the ability to say one dramatic yes, but the discipline to live out that yes through both the miraculous and the mundane moments of ordinary life.

February 1, 2009

Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111;
1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

If Epiphany is the season of recognition, when we are called on to heed the signs and recognize the Messiah among us, then today's gospel reading reminds us that the faithful are not the only ones to see Jesus as the Anointed One.

Capernaum will be an important place for Jesus and the disciples, and it is here in the synagogue that Jesus begins his teaching ministry in Mark's gospel. What strikes his listeners is not so much the content of what he says, but the way in which he says it. The crowds are shocked by Jesus, because he teaches as "one with authority."

As a preacher, I am both comforted and disturbed by the notion of authority. I appreciate that I am in one of the few professions left in the world where people will sit still on a weekly basis to hear me pontificate (even if some of them are catching up on rest during my pontifications), and I also know that whatever reverence or disrespect is given my office has largely been earned or lost by those who have gone before me. When strangers meet me as a pastor, their impressions of me as a human being (and as an "authority") become tangled up with whatever preconceptions they have about other religious leaders they've known. They have to decide for themselves if I know what I'm talking about.

In that way, modern folks are not unlike those people in the Old Testament that decided they wanted nothing more to do with God's holy (and

often destructive) presence, asking instead for a mediator. But as soon as that distance is established, the burden falls to the people to decide whether or not a prophet is speaking God's words, or some unholy nonsense. The listeners have to decide where the authority lies.

The unclean spirit that presents itself in the Capernaum synagogue does not get to make that choice. Like other evil forces that come face to face with Jesus, he helplessly obeys Christ's command to leave his host. The gift of discernment is a precious power, one of the blessings and burdens of being human.

Perhaps this is a Sunday to talk openly and honestly about our own "authority issues." For those of us who are charged with letting the words of God tumble out of our mouths, who are called on weekly to pontificate from the pulpit, it is a healthy reminder that we are simply vessels for the true Authority.

February 8, 2009

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11, 20c;
1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Word spreads quickly about where Jesus is, and Mark tells us that the whole town gathered outside the door. At sunset, when the Sabbath restrictions were lifted, Jesus spends the next several hours, well into the night, facing weeping, desperate families, carrying their dying child to him in their arms, begging him to do something. It is a first century emergency room.

And he heals them. Over and over and over again, he heals them. It is good work. It is needed work. It feels like Messiah work.

But then the next morning, when the sun rises, the disciples see that his sleeping bag is empty. He's not in the kitchen, where Peter's mother-in-law is making breakfast. He's not in the yard, where a line of people has already formed, demanding to see him, propping up their sick relatives and dying friends to see this strange healer.

He's nowhere to be found. Having hardly slept the night before, Jesus slips out before dawn,

and finds a quiet place to pray. The disciples find him there, looking as if he has just run a marathon or been in a wrestling match or worse. “Every one is looking for you,” one of them finally whispers. “What should we tell them?”

Does he turn back, and help all those people? They certainly need him. Cancer and leprosy and mental illness and depression—they need his touch, they need his power.

When I imagine Jesus, I imagine Jesus getting to everyone. Healing everybody in town. That’s what I want in a Messiah. But instead of doing the task that looms in front of him, he prays. He goes off by himself, away from those faces, without even saying goodbye, and he prays. And when the disciples find him, he tells them he’s finished there. He’s moving on.

The disciples are more in my school of thought as to what a Messiah should do and be—“Well, what about the others, what are we going to tell them?” And all Jesus says is that “it’s time to move on.” Doesn’t that sound a bit harsh to you, like he walks through half of the cancer ward, healing half of those patients, sending half of those families into dances of joy, but doesn’t worry about the others?

This season is about learning who the Messiah is, and I can’t help but think Jesus is learning right alongside us. We like to imagine him with a script, with a map to who and what he must be, but that is contrary to orthodox Christology, which firmly holds to Jesus’ paradoxical duality of humanity and divinity. Even Jesus needs some peace and quiet if he is to be who God has called him to be. He understands that to live for God is to bind yourself to the voice of the Divine, even if that means ignoring the many compelling voices that are calling us to be something we are not.

As we discern our own journeys of faith, as we make difficult decisions that pit good against good, as we decide how our energies might best serve God’s kingdom, let us also have the courage to stop and listen for God’s guidance in our lives.

February 15, 2009
2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45

Both the 2 Kings reading and the Gospel lesson for today tell stories of lepers being healed, but these two men reveal very different attitudes in their quests for healing.

In 2 Kings, Naaman is instructed by the prophet Elisha to wash himself seven times in the Jordan, in the hope that his leprosy might be cured. It seems like an easy enough call to make. He has reached the end of his patience, though, and is feeling foolish for having listened to a servant girl’s advice in the first place. He has already paraded himself in front of Israel’s king, who sent him away to Elisha, and now Elisha won’t even come out of his house to greet him. His pride has been trampled on, and the notion that his leprosy would just wash off in some river sounds like a final insult.

But it is another one of his servants who asks him, “What could it hurt? We’ve come all this way, won’t you at least try?” And so try he does, and as he comes out of the water that seventh time, his skin is restored.

In Mark’s story, the leper is far less proud than Naaman. He needs no encouragement, but simply falls at the feet of Jesus, begging for healing. This leper’s request for healing is not a question at all. Instead, he makes a statement of faith: “If you choose, you can make me clean.” His prayer is a profession of faith. He seems to inherently know exactly what Jesus is capable of, just like the unclean spirits did in verses 21-28. One of the messages here is that those who are on the fringes—be they servant girls, unclean spirits, or poor lepers—have a unique capacity to recognize the presence of God.

As a college chaplain, I often spend time with families at the hospital. Recently I had been visiting a young girl who had been badly injured, and her mother, who had camped out in the ICU waiting room, hoping for the best. As the mother and I visited, she mentioned that she had never been very religious; she had never attended church

much. So when we went back to see her daughter, hooked up to a ventilator, unable to breathe on her own, machines beeping and clicking to keep her stable, the mother asked me to pray.

Not to boast, but I do pretty well in these situations. I read off a laundry list to God, of things God needed to be doing, to heal this girl, to heal the heart of this mother. It was a good prayer, and I was glad to offer it on behalf of this mother who didn't know much about Christianity.

When it was over, the mother cried a bit and thanked me. Then she turned to her daughter and said, "My prayer has just been that I have the strength to follow God's will. All I can ask for now is that his will be done.

This was a true epiphany-moment, as God surprised me and curbed my pride by sending an unlikely witness. This "non-religious" woman revealed her great faith through a simple prayer of submission.

February 22, 2009

2 Kings 2:1-12; Psalm 50:1-6;
2 Corinthians 4:3-6; Mark 9:2-9

Well, this is it. The climax of Jesus' story.

Drop the curtain. Run the credits. This has blockbuster written all over it.

A child, born into anonymous poverty, raised by peasants, turns out to be the Son of God. He comes of age, wanders around the Judean countryside, heals some sick folks, feeds a few thousand people with last night's leftovers, and calls a handful of followers.

These disciples, his followers, leave everything they have, give up all their possessions, say good-bye to their families and quit their jobs just to follow Jesus around. And to be honest, there are days when they wonder why they did it. But then one day, Jesus leads them up onto a mountain, far away from everyone else. And there, up on that mountain, everything changes.

The clouds open up and Elijah, the same one who got picked up by a low swinging sweet chariot in our Old Testament reading for the day, is there. The same one for whom Jewish families set out an empty chair at Passover, hoping he

would show up though he never does—this time, there on the mountain, he shows up. And Moses is there as well. But that's not all.

Jesus lights up like a holy firecracker, and God, as in God, the Creator of the Universe, speaks from the sky, "This is my son! Listen to what he has to say!"

Now this is a great situation, no matter who you are. This is church. What can you do to top this? Old Testament prophets appearing out of nowhere, God speaking from the sky, Jesus lit up like the sun, where do you go from here?

Well, here's a hint. Three days from now is Ash Wednesday, the start of the Lenten season. The lights go out. No Moses. No Elijah. The clouds stop talking. And Jesus, no longer looking like a 40 billion watt halogen, starts walking down the mountain.

We read this story on the last Sunday before Lent because when the lights go out, Jesus makes a beeline for Jerusalem. His path up until this point in Mark seems random and without direction. After his mountaintop experience, he walks directly toward the cross.

We celebrate this feast of light and life on the eve of our Lenten journey not because they are opposites, but because the hope of the mountain and the pain of the cross are part of the same journey. This is why Jesus asks his followers to follow him, and nothing more. He knows that, most days, it is almost too much to ask. We are called not to set up camp in the peaks of our lives, nor are we called to dwell perpetually in the shadows of the cross. We are called to follow. Wherever he leads. Up and down, left and right, feast and famine.

It might make a good movie to end the story here. But then it wouldn't be Christ's story.



Brian Erickson is an ordained Elder in the North Alabama Conference. He currently serves as the University Chaplain and Director of Religious Life at the University of Evansville in southwestern Indiana.