

Church of the Crossroads  
First Sunday after Epiphany  
January 13, 2008  
Neal MacPherson

“BAPTIZED”

Isaiah 42:1–9

Psalm 29  
Matthew 3:13–17

I am wondering: this morning, when you heard the words of Isaiah, followed by the words of the Psalm, and then the words of the Gospel reading, did you hear a word that is common to all three? I will not keep you in suspense. The word is *voice*. In the servant song of Isaiah—

He will not cry or lift up his *voice*,  
or make it heard in the street. (Isa 42:2)

In the Psalm—

The *voice* of God is over the waters . . .  
The *voice* of God is powerful . . .  
The *voice* of God is full of majesty . . .  
The *voice* of God breaks the cedars . . .  
The *voice* of God flashes forth in flames of fire . . .  
The *voice* of God causes the oaks to whirl,  
and strips the forest bare . . .  
and in God’s temple all say, “Glory.”

Then, in the reading from Matthew—

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a *voice* from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. (Mt 3:16–17)

The inclusion of the word *voice* connects the three readings. At the same time, I am wondering: did you sense a disconnection between the way

the “voice” is described in the psalm and the way the “voice” is depicted in the other two readings? In the Psalm, the “voice” is powerful and awesome, majestic. It is a voice that belongs to a powerful, awesome, majestic God, a God who is transcendent above the earth, a God whose power is so overwhelming that the only word that can be spoken in the temple is the word “glory!”

In sharp contrast, the voice belonging to the servant in the passage from Isaiah is so gentle, so soft, so muted that it can hardly be heard in the street. And the voice of God in Matthew’s narrative describing the baptism of Jesus is also a gentler voice—“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

I would like to suggest this morning that the passages from Isaiah and Matthew serve to shape a new understanding of how God’s presence is made known in the earth. When the powerful, mighty, transcendent God, whose voice is mighty and powerful, enters into the life of the world, she takes on a kind of gentleness and her voice becomes more muted, and in the process power is given a new definition. The power of God is no longer expressed as might and control and forcefulness, but as the vulnerability and humility of a suffering servant who will not cry or lift up his voice, who will not break those who are like a bruised reed or a dimly burning wick, who will bring forth justice in the manner of love. It is to such a way of being in the world that God calls the people of Israel. They are called to be

. . . a covenant to the people,  
 a light to the nations,  
 to open the eyes that are blind,  
 to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
 from the prison those who sit in darkness. (Isa: 6–7)

This will be accomplished through not through the power of might, but the power of love. In the words of the prophet— this is the new thing that God declares.

The early Christians surely saw Jesus in this light. For them, the power of God in the world had been re-shaped as the power of love. Jesus had not emerged on the scene as a powerful, “take charge” messiah. He emerged from the obscurity of Galilee, a place located far from worldly power. He came to submit to the baptism of John. Why should he, God’s

beloved, need to be baptized? Was not John's baptism a baptism for the forgiveness of sins? This troubled the Gospel writers. Each of them sought an explanation. Matthew's interpretation is that Jesus seeks to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus seeks to align himself with all who came to John seeking that same righteousness. Jesus seeks to be a righteous child of God.

Consequently, Jesus identifies himself with us, for is that not also what we seek? Do we not seek to be children of righteousness? In seeking to fulfill all righteousness, Jesus seeks to identify himself with us. He comes as one of us. He comes not in lordly power to overwhelm us. He comes in the power of love. He comes as God's beloved so that we too may become God's own beloved sons and daughters.

Jesus, the embodiment of the servant of Isaiah's servant songs, re-defines what the world understands as power. In the world, power is defined as might rather than love. That is how empire defines power. Imagine the powerful of the world committed to a love that will not permit their voices to be heard in the streets, a love that will not permit them to break a bruised reed or quench a dimly burning wick.

In truth, the world would prefer the God of the 29<sup>th</sup> psalm. The powers that be in the world would prefer a God whose voice is so powerful that it breaks the cedars and breaks forth in flames of fire. Such a divine voice suits the powerful of the world well. So it happened that Christendom, when it became established as a worldly power, sought a theology of glory and a transcendent God of might. Such a theology of glory with a mighty God of power suited Christendom well.

But Jesus had nothing such in mind when he arose from the waters of baptism and when he later carried out his ministry of love on the earth. Neither did those first followers of Jesus, those early Christians, seek after any kind of worldly power. Theirs was a power not belonging to this world. Theirs was a power rooted in love. In the name of Jesus, they did not seek to be an establishment. Rather, they chose to be a movement.

That movement, rooted in the Spirit that was so present at Jesus' baptism, and grounded in the power of love, soon was forgotten after Constantine chose Christianity as the religion of the empire. It is only now, in our post-Christendom world, that we have the opportunity to get in touch with the Christian Movement once again. Thanks be to God.

Jesus was baptized; so are we. And just as Jesus was baptized into a ministry rooted in the power of love rather than the power of might, so are we. We are not baptized into established religion; we are baptized into a movement begun in Jesus and sustained by God's own Spirit. As part of that movement, we do not seek to be established or honored. We do not seek worldly recognition and power. We do not seek to be rewarded. We seek only to love. We seek only to be faithful, to be salt and yeast in the world, and that little light set on a hill.

It is all so very modest, this ministry into which we have been baptized. There is nothing splashy or grandiose about it. To carry out this ministry takes only open minds and committed hearts, lives lived as God's beloved sons and daughters. To such a ministry into which we have been baptized, we dedicate ourselves anew this day.