

1.12.14

Richard Ward writes that “the preacher’s task during the season of Epiphany is to create a fresh portrayal of the one the church knows as its Christ.” So no pressure. My task today is simple: to take all your years of thinking about, praying to, worshiping, and talking about Jesus, toss them away, and give you fresh eyes with which to see. Easy.

I can’t claim to live up to that, so I won’t. Instead, my question in this homily regards how Jesus understood *himself*. He is such a mystery to us, this Jesus. He does things we all can sympathize with: gets angry, weeps in mourning, loves not wisely but too well. But he’s also God—and eventually, I think, our identification with Jesus-as-human drops away and our imaginations grow silent as we try to envision what in the world he was thinking—when being baptized; when wandering the desert; when working alongside his adopted father. How did he understand himself in the midst of the chaos of Judea and Rome and Sadducees and Pharisees?

So, rather than engaging in more debate about what Jesus would do, let’s just take a look at what Jesus does.

Well, we know Jesus took Isaiah seriously. I mean, he took all of the scriptures of his day seriously, but we see him reading Isaiah out loud in Nazareth; and by his actions and his words throughout the Gospels we hear an echo of Isaiah. So Isaiah helps us understand a bit of how Jesus may have seen himself—the sort of prophecy He saw himself in, when he read himself into the scriptures.

And it’s worthwhile to note that Jesus had choices here—he had alternative readings about the power of God that he could have turned to and adopted. We are presented with one even today in the Psalm. What a contrast between the quiet voice in Isaiah that is never raised in a shout, and the booming voice of the Lord in the Psalm that shakes mountains down! It would be hard to draw, at first glance, a starker contrast than what we see between these images of God and God’s work. Gentleness, tenderness, patience, versus booming thunder and the earth itself shaken to its core, trees stripped bare and broken. *How different our lives would be if Jesus had adopted the Psalm rather than Isaiah as his model of ministry.* The person we follow favored Isaiah’s rendering of the servant over the pounding shock and awe of a God who would call down fire from the heavens. It’s not that the Isaiah passage denies the power of God—contained within it is a song of praise to the God of creation “who created the heavens and stretched them out/who spread out the earth and what comes from it; who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it.” But that power, that overarching possessiveness, is in Isaiah turned toward the least and the weakest and the *wrong*, the prisoner and the sinner, and manifests itself in gentleness.

So we know that Jesus knew his Scriptures—and we know that Isaiah was influential. Especially these servant songs scattered through the latter half of the book, written most likely during and after the Babylonian Exile, when ‘who and where is God’ was surely

upon the lips of the exiles. For Jesus to take on these texts, to read himself into them and understand himself in response to them—we should take note.

But Christina, you might say—aren't you ignoring the powerful, brief Baptismal story we have in Matthew, where yes indeed God speaks from the heavens and the skies part and it sure seems a lot like our Psalm? To you I say, don't fret—I have not forgotten that the heavens opened over Jesus when he was baptized...but my question to you would be: opened over what, and in response to what?

The heavens opened to announce Jesus as God's Son not as he triumphantly rode into Jerusalem; not when he commanded an army. The heavens opened not to conclude an awe-inspiring show of power. The heavens opened when Jesus submitted himself to baptism by one not worthy to untie his sandals. And the heavens put forth, not a bolt of lightning, but a DOVE.

The voice spoke when Jesus's body, an all-too-human body, entered the waters of the Jordan and submitted to a practice that John himself thought was beneath Jesus. Nature cracked with God's presence when Jesus truly became a servant, a lowly one with no place to lay his head. Who did Jesus think he was? How did he understand himself? He saw himself as the gentle servant and so *was* the gentle servant, and God was well pleased.

Jesus' baptism, for a reason I can't explain, awakens these lyrics by Leonard Cohen in me:

*And Jesus was a sailor  
When he walked upon the water  
And he spent a long time watching  
From his lonely wooden tower  
And when he knew for certain  
Only drowning men could see him  
He said "All men will be sailors then  
Until the sea shall free them"  
But he himself was broken  
Long before the sky would open  
Forsaken, almost human  
He sank beneath your wisdom like a stone.*

The kenosis of the incarnation is mind-boggling enough—that God would lower himself, become frail and vulnerable, dependent upon others, broken where we are broken. Jesus' baptism takes this kenosis farther—he sinks beneath our paltry 'wisdom', submits to it, like a stone. Jesus heeds the servant songs; Jesus embodies vulnerability and submission in his baptism. And God is well-pleased.

It would be convenient to stop here—I played with the question I raised, and gave some sort of account. But this is not a merely exegetical exercise, and on a day where we should remember our own baptism, as we commemorate Jesus', of course we should also

read ourselves into the Scriptures. If Jesus is the servant of which Isaiah speaks, and Jesus so loves us that he submits, submits utterly, to the indignities and fragilities and betrayals that come with being human, how do we, should we follow him down to the water?

We must ask this question because if we follow Jesus, then we follow him all the way down. We follow him down the path of the quiet servant and *not* the bellowing king; we follow him down the path to the river Jordan, submitting to baptism by one who feels unworthy. We follow him up out of the waters of death and new life and out into the desert. We follow him down to the slums and to the houses of prostitution; we follow him to the adulteress and the tax collector and the prisoner. We see Peter follow Jesus when Peter proclaims, in his last great speech, against all his upbringing and instincts and family and neighbors, that God knows no partiality. We see a guy named Mark in Indiana follow Jesus when he heads out into the cold and snow to rescue a stranded Nepalese family he doesn't know, just because someone from Michigan called him. We see my friend Michelle follow Jesus, knowingly or not, when she hunkers down in the homeless shelter for youth she helps run in Nashville and just stays, stays, stays. The path of the gentle servant is not an easy path—being meek and tender and patient, these are not easy things. But I am so glad that our Jesus is one who heard those words of Isaiah and said yes. I am so glad to follow Jesus, who does not yell but who gently, patiently, lovingly protects the weakest and the most damaged of us, and who calls, so quietly, calls for peace. My lesser self longs for the signs and portents of a violent nature God who shouts from the heavens. But my tender little Christian self, who hides a lot, just loves that the big booming voice spoke and the heavens opened not to wow us all into submission, but simply to say “Yes” to this man, Jesus, who lowered himself into waters he didn't have to enter, to rise up out of them and begin his servant-mission. Oh, thank you, Lord, that we get to follow this Jesus.