

Do Not Travel Alone
2nd Epiphany, Jan. 10, 2010
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“Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also was baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the bodily form of a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ ” (Luke 3:21-22 NRSV)

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It happens every year. You can count on it, just like clockwork. It is the first Sunday after Epiphany. The greens have been taken down, the Christmas carols are over, and we go abruptly from the child Jesus to Jesus as a thirty-something at his baptism.

This sudden transition marks the beginning of a liturgical journey that will in three short months take us from one end of Jesus’ public ministry to the other—from his baptism at the Jordan, to his death at Golgotha on Good Friday, and finally to his empty tomb on Easter Sunday. It is a spiritual journey we make together every year, but that does not make it any the less stunning.

The Gospel readings for the first Sunday after Epiphany rotate in a three year cycle from Matthew to Mark and then to Luke. In all three Gospels the story of Jesus’ ministry starts with his baptism. This is Luke’s year. Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke does not tell us directly about the actual baptism but only a recap of the events after the baptism. Also, Luke’s account of the event is different from the others in two distinct ways. First, Jesus, according to Luke, is baptized with “all the people.” And second, the Holy Spirit and the voice from heaven declaring Jesus to be the beloved son only come after the baptism and only while Jesus is praying. I believe that Luke is telling us something important that each of us needs to use on our own personal journey. We do not travel alone.

Jesus just gets in line. That is the picture I get from Luke’s account. John is baptizing and Jesus takes his turn with “all the people.” Why did Jesus need to be baptized? John’s baptism was a “baptism of repentance.” If there was one thing that Jesus did not need to do it was to repent. But Jesus’ need or rather lack of need, for repentance is not the point here. When Jesus gets into that line, he is there with those who are sinners. He is in line with those who have suffered the trials of this world. He is in line with those who desperately need forgiveness and healing. He is in line with you and me. He is not in line because of his needs, but rather to identify with the needy. He is not in line for himself but rather to show he is with us when we are broken and tired. Jesus came to be among sinners, not to lecture them or to simply pass out miracles.

Do we understand the example Jesus is giving us? Do we as followers of Jesus really identify with the broken, with the tired, with sinners? Do we get in line with them and

welcome them as our brothers and sisters? Do we go out into the wilderness and the countryside and seek them out as Jesus did? Or do we want to travel on our journey with only the people we are comfortable with? Jesus could have started his journey in the splendor of the Temple in Jerusalem surrounded by the learned, the rich and the powerful. Instead, he started out in the wilderness with those who were in grief and sorrow and knew they needed help. This being a Christian is really a messy thing. It would be a lot easier if we could just pray to Jesus by ourselves, or maybe with a few of our family and close friends that we really like and get along with well. No, this is a journey we do not make alone. We make this pilgrimage with everyone we happen to meet on the road no matter who they are or what they are. That is where Jesus was on the day of his baptism, the day he started his ministry. He was there with “all the people.”

But that is not the only thing that Luke is pointing out to us. While Jesus was obviously not alone because there were many others with him, Jesus knew he could not complete his journey on his own even with the company of “all the people.” He knew that he could not complete his ministry by himself with only his own strength and abilities. Thus, Jesus was not only coming to the people, he was also coming to God in prayer. It is when he is in prayer that the Spirit descends on him. It is when he is in prayer that he receives the wonderful affirmation that he is the beloved Son of God in whom God is well pleased.

Are we trying to travel alone? Are we trying to travel without God? Are we counting on our own strength and abilities and ignoring the grace of the Spirit? Are we praying as Jesus gave us the example? It is only with the presence of God and the strength of the Spirit that we can journey in the world with others and hope to make a difference.

In these few, short, wonderful words about the baptism of Jesus, Luke tells us much. We do not travel alone. We need God to travel with us, and we need to go together. It is simple to say, harder to do. But I intend to follow Jesus. I intend to travel as he did—with God and with “all the people.” Do you want to come along? Come on, let’s go together!

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