

The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 4 & 5, 2006
Sermon by Rev Timothy A Leitzke

I didn't like what I was hearing in seminary. I could handle every shocking theory about the origins of the Bible. I could write a sermon and lead a liturgy. I was comfortable learning the dynamics of a congregation. I reveled in doctrine and theology. What I didn't like was the fact that the only tool we were given to reassure ourselves and our faith was to "remember our baptisms". Aside from the fact that this sounded like someone who had no time to talk to my faith, I had a real problem with this. I do not remember my baptism. I was six weeks old! How could I get any comfort from this idea? Why should I pretend to remember a day I could not remember? There have been other times that I have felt unmistakably that God was talking to me. I remember those, but I'm not getting one of those now, either! What did it matter that I was baptized? I feel alone, now.

We each feel that alienation from God. It's different for each of us. Some of us feel a god-shaped hole inside of us where the god of our youth or childhood used to live. Some of us feel we can never live up to God. Some of us are angry at God. Some of us feel an increasing distance between God and ourselves. On the other hand, some of us feel drawn closer to God. Some of us are bursting with joy at God's presence in our lives. Be the experiences negative or positive they all indicate some sort of gap needing to be closed. For me, God was always there, always here, always with me, but God chose only to reveal little bits to me, and those moments of revelation always receded quickly into the past.

God's manifestation in Jesus is obvious enough in the reading from St Mark. Jesus went to work healing people straightaway after leaving the synagogue. His healing drew people to him by dozens, even hundreds at a time. He came to Simon's mother-in-law and raised her. In a very real way Jesus gave her new life. She lay ill but Jesus raised her in good health. We say something very similar to this when we speak of baptism. We lay ill with sinfulness, but God drowns that sinful person and raises us as saints, as a new creation. Jesus reveals God's power to love, forgive, and restore, and he reveals it to Simon's mother-in-law in one miraculous act. It is a baptismal event, even though there's no water. Jesus, Who Is Stronger than the fever, raises Simon's mother-in-law in health.

But then Jesus vanishes. He gets up very early, probably around 4:30am, and sneaks out of town. (If any of you skip the Wednesday 7am Holy Communion because you think God isn't awake yet, let it be known that God's son gets up at 4:30! ☺) He goes into the wild to pray, and his disciples desperately hunt him down, tracking him as though he were a wild animal. The miracles are barely finished and already they recede into the past as Jesus slips away while the city sleeps. In the same manner our baptisms and our moments of revelation recede quickly into the past, and we wake up wondering where God is. We look frantically. We look for the signs. What is God doing? Where are God's tracks? That's one of the things we do when we pray and discern: we look for God's tracks. We find the imprints and we follow the path.

When the disciples finally find Jesus he has a curious thing to say to them: “Let us go elsewhere, into the market-towns being nearby, in order that I might preach there also, for into this I came out.” Jesus didn’t sneak away to get away from his disciples; he went out so that they would follow him out into his ministry in new places. In the same manner God does not abandon us. God has not slipped away in the darkness to leave us, no, Friends of Christ. Jesus seemed to have left, but it was because he wanted the disciples to follow him. God seems to have left, but God is calling us out to follow.

In holy baptism God marks each of us and calls us God’s own. We have been baptized and we belong to God. The act of being baptized recedes into the past, but the baptism goes on. We *always* belong to God. God will *always* be faithful to us. God is calling us out to follow. As Jesus raised Simon’s mother-in-law that day in Capernaum, God raises us today and every day. As Jesus went out from Capernaum that morning, God goes out from this place today and every day. As Jesus called his disciples to go with him into new places, God calls us to proclaim the gospel in new places. Friends of Christ God does not want us to feel distant from God. God wants us to be close. God is hopping with excitement for the Day that we can all be fully together with God. God draws us closer now by calling us into new places.

New places could be anywhere. If we feel a god-shaped hole inside God is calling us into a new place, a place beyond our former conception of God and a faith that is honest in dealing with our experiences. If we feel that we can never

live up to God then God is calling us into a new place, a place where we can accept the forgiveness that God offers, the justification God gives to us freely, and the understanding that God steps down from being above us and meets us face to face. If we are angry at God then God is calling us into a new place—a place where it is okay to be frustrated with God—and a new faith—a faith that recognizes that God will not always give us what we want, even if we had very good and just reason for wanting it. If we feel an increasing distance between God and ourselves God is calling us into a place beyond ourselves, into the world that God created, into the life of reckless, self-giving love that Jesus lived. When God pulls us into these strange new places our faith is challenged and our faith grows, and we learn that God has not abandoned us at all.

Friends of Christ, I do not remember April 22, 1979, the day that the Body of Christ celebrated my baptism, but my baptism continues. God raises me every minute of every day, as God raises little Morgan and Jesse and each of us. God is raising us so that we can follow the path that Jesus walked. God is raising us to draw us closer to God. I am reminded of it every time I come here for worship. I do not remember the day that the Body of Christ celebrated my baptism; what I remember is that God has claimed me—that God has claimed each of us—and that God did this to draw us closer, not to leave us behind. God has claimed us to take us on the journey of faith, with Christ as our guide, and to go into our new places and live the word of God there and let God deepen our faith Let us go into the new places, and proclaim the Good News , for that is why Christ came. Amen