

The Baptism of our Lord  
First Sunday after Epiphany  
Raymond Raney

Isaiah 42:1-9

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

It's cold out. The air is thin. Thin because the low temperature keeps the air from holding humidity, and it feels thin. That's appropriate because we're in a thin time and a thin space. That's Epiphany. The time of the manifestation of the divine in this world that began with the recognition of Jesus as the Son of God by the Magi.

Today as we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord by John in the Jordan River. And the Jordan is important. God parted the Red Sea to save his people from the Egyptian army and allow them to cross water on dry land. When the Hebrews entered the promised land, Joshua stationed the Ark of the Covenant in the Jordan and the water stopped flowing so that the people crossed the river on dry land. When the Prophet Elijah was taken up into heaven, he passed his cloak to his student Elisha, who had asked for a double portion of his divine power. To test that the prophet's mantle had been passed, Elisha struck the Jordan with the cloak and the river parted so that he might cross it on dry land. When Jesus entered the Jordan to be baptized by John, it was not the river that parted but Heaven itself.

And we hear the Father say: "This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased." And the Holy Spirit descends like a dove.

We find ourselves confronted with the first event that brings together the elements of the Trinity. The Son finds his way to the river Jordan, the voice of the Father sounds out from Heaven, and the Holy Spirit descends on us. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, for the first time, in one place at one time opening Heaven to the Earth and the Earth to Heaven, creating a thin space.

The thin space is described best in Celtic Spirituality as that moment, that place where the separation of this world and the next becomes thin: no longer opaque, but translucent, even transparent. I've veiled the altar tapestries to demonstrate the sense of thin spaces. As you can see, where the veil is tripled on itself, we cannot see the figures behind, and where it is only doubled we begin to see them, and when the veil is a single layer, they are visible to us.

When we encounter these moments, they are hard to communicate. I experienced a thin space last year here at Holy Cross. It was Ash Wednesday, my second week here as the Rector. I was here alone most of the day. We'd had services at 6:30 a.m., at noontime, and at 7 p.m. with hours between. During that time alone, I was suddenly aware of a profound silence. It was strange, it was freaky. I didn't know what to think. It was if I

was surrounded by a bubble, as if the building was contained within a bubble, it was quiet, abnormally quiet.

It's not that I haven't experienced silence before. I've practiced contemplative prayer. And I had experienced thin spaces and times before. I sensed the presence of loved ones at the cemetery when I've conducted services. I experienced the presence of my mother when I visited home this past month, and walked into her house for the first time since her death over a year ago. Her presence was palpable, and I could almost hear her voice.

But still, last year, I didn't realize what was happening. Rather than dwelling in that moment, which I would do now, I drove off to Smith's to walk around and be with other people. I drove over to Walgreen's to walk around and be around sounds. I didn't know what to do with the experience. Even now, I can only describe the experience in the vaguest terms, not the emotional experience. I am confined to metaphor and simile, and a reach for symbols.

Among the symbols today, this being the Baptism of the Lord, I placed the shells, one of wood and one from the ocean, on the altar as symbols of the tools we use in baptizing. We would have had a baptism today, but I don't have any candidates ready. I've also set out the Paschal candle, which we use at baptisms and at Easter as the symbol of the light of Christ emerging from the tomb, bringing a new light to the world, a world in which that light had not shone before. At the end of the baptismal service we give the newly baptized a candle, and we say: "This is the light of Christ, now you be a light to the world." It's a daunting task to take the light of Christ into the world, but that's what we are called to.

As we hear from Isaiah: "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness." Righteousness is not knowing right from wrong. Righteousness is not following the rules. Righteousness is about being in right relationship with God and with those around us. When Jesus says "it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness," he is talking about their relationship with God. It's all about relationship, and this is a thin place.

It's from a thin place that Peter declares "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." Peter has just had a dream in which God reveals that creation is good. That's all of creation, not just what is approved by Torah and the Dietary Laws of Judaism. When Peter uses the term "no partiality," he is not saying that God doesn't have favorites, what he's saying is that God has established a relationship with humankind.

The word is partiality in Greek means "lifting of the head." In the culture of the Middle East, in Judaism, in Greece, in Rome, when one encountered someone of higher social status, the accepted practice was to bow one's head, or even kneel before the one to whom one would address as "my lord" or "my lady." If the person of higher status wished to establish eye contact, and thereby open a relationship with the person whose head was bowed, the practice was to reach down and touch the chin and lift the head of the person, and their eyes would meet.

That's what God did in Jesus the Christ. God reached into this world through the thin space and lifted the head of humanity to establish eye contact through the face of Jesus Christ – the loving face of God the Son: to see ourselves reflected in eyes that shine with the love of God.

Epiphany is a thin time for us. That's why it's important to be here and now, to experience the thinness of Epiphany while we are in the season. Lent is coming so soon this year. Easter is just one day from being the earliest it can be. Shrove Tuesday will be the Fifth of February and Ash Wednesday comes too soon. It's not time to go there yet. We have enough time in Lent to think of our sins and change.

Now is a time to be with God in the thinness of the Epiphany. In the midst of winter as we begin to see the length of the days growing longer, let us wonder at the manifestation of the divine in this world, to welcome the miracles of each sunrise and each sunset, and the wonder of those first green buds that will come with spring. And know the wonder of the lives we touch each and every day. As we reach for God in those thin times, we can remember the gift of Christ to our world and hope to stand before God on our last day, and say: this was my life, these are those I loved, this is what I have done with the life I was given. And we hope to hear our heavenly father say: "This is my child, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

Amen.