

2 Epiphany
Sermon for January 20, 2008
Raymond Raney

Isaiah 49:1-7
Psalm 40:1-12
1 Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

Shortly, when we begin the Eucharistic Prayer, I will read what is called “the preface” – the words that set the stage for the vision of the Sanctus. And those words will be the Preface for Epiphany:

Because in the mystery of the Word made flesh, you have caused a new light to shine in our hearts, to give the knowledge of your glory in the face of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

That light is reflected in the reading on Christmas Day: the Prologue of John:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God ... and the light shined in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it. ... And there was a man named John, and he was not the light but bore witness to the light.

That’s the witness we hear today in the reading from the Gospel of John. John the Baptizer pointed to Jesus and says: “This is the Lamb of God.” And we hear John describe what happened at the Baptism, something we are not shown in John. The other Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke relate what happened: That Jesus approaches the Jordan, John protests but relents, Jesus is baptized, and a voice from heaven declares “this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased” and the Holy Spirit, like a dove descends on Jesus the Son.

What John gives us here is not so much a description of the event, but rather the reason for his ministry of reconciliation at the water of the Jordan. “I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John knew not from looking at Jesus, but from the signs that accompanied him. John looked into the eyes of Jesus and saw something special, but the revelation came from the Holy Spirit.

We can tell a lot from people’s faces. We form opinions based on first impressions. We even like some people more than others at first glance. I’ve learned over the years to hold my opinions because way too often my first impression is wrong.

When I was teaching video art at UNM, I taught an autobiography class. One of the first exercises I made my students do was to take the mirror off their medicine cabinet, take it into the living room, and stare at their faces for half an hour, and then write down what they observed,

what they felt, what they thought. It's not easy to stare at yourself in the mirror for five minutes, let alone half an hour. Most of us don't look at ourselves much. This exercise forced them to confront themselves face to face.

I'd done the exercise myself several years before, and periodically, it's interesting to attempt the practice and see what happens that's new. New, it is new because as the years pass, my face has changed.

What I've discovered is that no matter how long I stare into my own face, no matter how deeply I search into my own eyes, I never look like what I think I ought to look like. My eyes never reveal that deeper, inner self that I would think my eyes would reveal. No matter how hard I try I can never peel away the layers of my self to discover that deep inner self that it hidden from the world.

Who am I really? I remember that my intention when I got out of the service was to go to college and study writing. I thought maybe I could go for teaching as a way of making a living. Maybe teach English. So I took classes I thought would enhance my ability to write. One of those classes was in Journalism, and the teacher commented that she thought maybe I had a talent for newspapers. I took her advice, and went into Journalism.

After 15 years in newspapers, I suddenly found myself at 40, and unemployed. I went to a counselor to deal with my midlife crisis and to seek direction. I took the battery of tests to see what interested me. Turned out that the only thing that interested me was art. (Ministry and the priesthood are not one of the choices). So I went into art. And I learned about art and even started making art and teaching art. That lasted for about 12 years, and I again started looking for a new direction.

It was just after 9/11 and my friends and I were beginning to ask "what do I want to do for the rest of my life." I had been able to avoid dealing with the call from God – even when that call had been a voice saying: "Be a priest." So I finally answered the call instead of waiting for someone to tell me what direction to take.

God's call is not directive. It's more of a suggestion to our hearts that a demand to our minds. That's the problem with the disciples. They wanted someone to say "this is the way" ... like when John pointed at Jesus and said "this is the lamb of God." Jesus does not administer a dope slap and point in the direction we are to go. We must look for the light in the eyes of others, because we might not see the light in our own eyes. The light in the eyes of others often reflect to us the Christ born in relationship with God.

So often we see the light in the eyes of others. That light shines in the darkness, and we are so drawn to look that we can be brought out of the darkness. It is the wonder we encounter with others, that the mirror of our souls shines in the reflected light of the lives of those we encounter.

"Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The light in the darkness. And it was right there, all the time.