

Epiphany 1 Year C 1/13/19 Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17 and Luke 3:15-17; 21-22

I remember being a young lad in elementary school and having to have my parents help me occasionally with the difficult parts of my homework assignments. The memory that stands out for me is the fact that I was not gifted with a natural propensity toward an aptitude in mathematics in those days and my dear mother took on the challenge of helping me with that portion of my homework to which she became very frustrated because I was typically insistent on understanding why she was saying to do an operation this way or that way. Her response to this was “Because this is how you have to do it to get the correct answer.” I remember not being satisfied with that response, saying “But I don’t understand how you got there, or why you do it that way”, to which she would respond, “Just do it that way, that’s just the way you do it...you don’t need to understand why.”

Well, I don’t think I ever did understand why but I did eventually figure out how to get the correct answers to equations and even ended up with a degree in Economics; but, I’m not sure to this day how I got there, or pulled that off, other than through the grace of God.

Those who came to John the Baptist to be baptized were filled with expectations of the coming of a Messiah, an Agent of God, who would restore Israel and the triumph of God’s power and authority. Thinking perhaps John might be He, what they hear from John is “No, while I baptize you with water, I am not worthy to untie the thong of His sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with Fire.” The next thing they knew they were seeing John baptize Jesus, who when He rose from the water had the Spirit of God in the form of a dove descend upon Him. To this they may likely have thought, what does this mean? How is a dove going to restore the triumph of God’s power and authority? We don’t get it!

And, at the same time, they hear the voice of God say, “You are my Son the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” None of this would have been what they were expecting or what they would have understood anymore that I ever wrapped my mind around mathematics or the fact I ended up with a degree in Economics. Suffice it to say, in both cases, God’s grace was both enough for them and for me; and, more than any of us could possibly comprehend.

The kind of power and authority that Jesus would bring was not to be an overt demonstration of dominance that the people may have been expecting from a Messiah. Rather the power and authority Jesus demonstrated in response to His Baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit was that of service and servant leadership in His movement toward a Way of Love that was to culminate in the realization of His Father’s Kingdom on earth. The power emanating from this Messiah was one of Grace (symbolized by the dove) combined with the unparalleled power of Love (as evidenced by the voice from God).

The role of John the Baptist in all of this, to me, resembles that of a Deacon, in that he was connecting the people in the world outside of the walls of the Temple to Jesus. John then demonstrates the ritual of Baptism for washing away a life of sin and replacing it with a life of

service to neighbor, and thereby, God. He was the voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way of Jesus-the Divine Justice-to follow, who cared for the poor, the sick, the weak and the lonely without taking advantage of them for personal gain. Jesus then demonstrates the way this is done by coming up out of the water, empowered with The Holy Spirit, going out into the wilderness to first pray and be alone with God, then start a ministry of Divine Justice illuminating the way to the Kingdom of God.

And, Jesus, in so doing, shows us just how powerful this Holy Spirit is, empowering Him to stand up to and defeat Satan-even death itself. I think we, myself, included, often overlook how empowered we are from our gift of this Holy Spirit to do our own ministries of love and service to our neighbors out in the world.

This Holy Spirit that Jesus baptizes us with-this Spirit of Fire that He gives us-is the power of God by our sides. As it says in our reading today from Isaiah, "When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you, for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

Brothers and Sisters, we have the power of God to go outside the walls of St. Benedict's and be the Church by being a voice for neighbors in need who cry out in the wilderness. And, that need might be something we don't understand what to do about or for. But we, armed with our faith and the power of the Holy Spirit, will be guided into what we are to do, which may be only to show up and show that we care, or to lend a genuinely concerned ear, or simply to be present and wait for the direction of the Spirit to guide and reveal the opportunity to reinforce the comforting knowledge of God's overwhelming love. There is no need to understand why or how-just that we have the power of God to walk through fire and not be consumed. We have already done a pretty good being the hands and feet of Jesus by our ministries of the Warming Shelter, Laundry Love and feeding the hungry; but, we can still use our voice like John the Baptist to remind our government officials of our less fortunate neighbors who yearn for justice.

To reiterate some of the powerful words we heard in Psalm 29 this morning: "The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice; the voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor...the Lord sits enthroned above the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as King for evermore. The Lord shall give strength to his people; the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace."

Yes, it's beyond our ability to understand the grace of God's love for us, or the ability we have been empowered with by the Holy Spirit. And just like my dear mother used to tell me we don't need to understand why. All we need to understand is that we just need to do; and, that by doing we can give the Lord's people the blessing of His peace.

AMEN