

*Let us pray: Lord, open my lips that I may proclaim your praise;
open our ears and our hearts that we might receive your Word. Amen.*

It's been a week, huh? On Wednesday we celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany – and I guess we can say the light shone bright – bright enough to see how deep and ugly our wounds are.

It was a day of whiplash, as jubilation or despondency about election results in Georgia turned to concerns that some lawmakers would disrupt the certification of our presidential election in the Congress. Little did we know that the disruption would come from marauders overrunning our Capitol, attacking the very heart of our democratic processes.

This is our mission field, my friends, this place of brokenness and division.

This is where we are called to be bearers of peace, agents of transformation. to speak truth in the face of lies, and proclaim justice and equity, advocate for the voiceless and stand with the powerless.

What we have to offer is love – a particular, powerful, transforming love, that comes through us from the God who cannot but love, that changes the way people see themselves, that changes the world.

Love is our super power, our secret weapon for good.

All the elements of peace-making – forgiveness, non-violence, restorative justice, radical hospitality to those who are different from us, vulnerability – need to be rooted in our knowledge of how beloved we are by God, by others.

Without awareness of our belovedness, our love has little power.

You know how they say, it is more blessed to give than to receive?

Love is something we need to be aware of having received in order to give it well.

We read the story of Jesus' baptism every year, because this is where his mission began, God's mission to reclaim, restore and renew all of creation to wholeness.

This is where our participation in that mission begins, in that water of life.

All the elements of Jesus' baptism are incorporated into our baptismal rite.

We use the water of cleansing and renewal, which is also the water of drowning and new birth.

We signify the anointing of the Holy Spirit in the oil of chrism, anointing, with which the baptized is marked on the forehead as Christ's own forever.

This may well have been part of baptism as St. Paul knew it in the earliest days of the Church. In Ephesians, he writes, *“When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit...”*

Maybe Paul was writing to those folks in Ephesus that he baptized, that we read about this morning, who had not until then known there was a Holy Spirit, which is true for too many Episcopalians.

Trying to be a Christian without the Spirit is like trying to run a car on fumes. It leaves us striving, thinking we need to do it ourselves, and ultimately pushing. All that is asked of us as peace-makers and transformers in Christ is empowered by the Spirit – but we need to receive that Spirit, which we do in baptism.

Paul likened that anointing to a down-payment of sorts:

“...the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession.”

The Holy Spirit is the gas that powers us as agents of transformation.

People in more Pentecostal traditions call this “baptism in the Spirit,” when someone prays for you to receive the Spirit and you actually experience sensation. Those elders in Ephesus spoke in tongues and prophesied.

John Wesley felt “his heart strangely warmed.” People often feel heat in their hands or face or whole body when they’re filled with the Spirit.

The literature of healing ministry is filled with stories of perfectly wonderful clergyfolks who plodded along in ministry until someone prayed for them to be filled with the Spirit, and suddenly they felt power and light and purpose, and they manifested gifts for healing or prophetic speech.

No one can make another receive the Spirit, but we can pray that for each other. And we can learn to pay attention to when we do feel it.

I had a friend, a lifelong church-goer, who never thought much about the Spirit. But when she began to learn about how the Spirit operates in us, she realized that sometimes in church she felt a tingling in her spine in stirring moments – when a sermon hit home, or a hymn moved her – and she began to explore that.

The tingling got stronger when she began to pray, “Is that you, God?” Her faith deepened, and she began to become more active in ministry.

Sometimes people will find themselves filled with peace, or gently weeping but with joy – there are many ways our bodies and minds are affected by this energy.

When I pray for healing with people, and sometimes when I sing or teach,
I feel a rush of energy and a lot of heat – my face and hands get warm, I'm
filled with joy and, "Man, I can't believe God is doing this!" That is the Holy Spirit.
Don't leave that gift sitting in the closet – take it out and use it!

That day in the river, as Jesus began the mission that would lead in three years
to thousands of lives transformed, and a price on his head,
he received the Spirit in a way he had not before.

He became then the "Anointed One," which in Greek is the "Christ."
Everything begins here – for Jesus, and for those of us united with him
in baptism and ministry.

And when he ascended to heaven God sent the Spirit upon us,
so we might continue his work. This work is never our work, but his.

The third element in Jesus' baptism is that voice of deep affirmation,
that voice of God claiming Jesus as son – in relationship; beloved.

Did Jesus need to be reminded of his Father's love, or who he was in relationship?
Yes – the mission he was just starting would be hard and lonely and dangerous.
He needed to start from a place of deep belovedness so he could pour himself out
in love, like a water fall that gives and gives, continually replenished.

Might not the same be true for us?

God invites us to be the conduits for transforming love.

Not just affirming, cuddly love – truth-telling, sacrifice-making love that changes.

Who do you know who is aching for transformation,
for being lifted out of a life of limitation into a life of promise?

Who needs to hear God's "yes" in a lifetime of "no's?"

Do you feel equipped to proclaim that promise, carry that love?

I don't – except as I'm in touch with myself as beloved.

Without belovedness in God, I'm a talented, warm human being with gifts
and energy – but no power to bring transformation. In fact, I can bring hurt.

It's only as I am reminded, and remind myself of how much God loves me –
and when I hear God in prayer, that's usually the message –
that my gifts become effective to bring change.

I only become God's secret weapon when I know I'm loved.

And so I need to be reminded, and so do you. We need to remind each other. No one is called into Christian life in a vacuum. The “noise” around us will always overwhelm us if we don’t encourage and support each other.

Who has been good at reminding you that you are beloved of God, delightful and pleasing to God? Who in your life might need a reminder this week?

Tip: it may well be someone you live with. It’s so easy to forget to cherish those closest to us... so this week start telling your family, “You are beloved.”

Leave notes on the bathroom mirror, tell them at bedtime. It’ll change them.

Our culture has gotten really bad at reminding each other of our belovedness. Here’s a mission for you this week – if you’re active on social media, you’ll see the animosity and vitriol has grown worse since Wednesday, not for no reason...

But what if, when we see an angry comment, whether or not we agree with it, We posted a reply: “You are beloved.”

Again and again through our social media feeds. Some people might react with anger, like “who are you to tell me I’m beloved?” Some might be silent.

But people will notice. Some will stop and pass it along.

What a movement we could start!

Bishop Steven Charleston, retired Bishop of Alaska and a member of the Choctaw Nation, posted this in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder and the turmoil in our country – it is as apt now:

“Now is the moment for which a lifetime of faith has prepared you. All of those years of prayer and study, all of the worship services, all of the time devoted to a community of faith: it all comes down to this, this sorrowful moment when life seems chaotic and the anarchy of fear haunts the thin borders of reason. Your faith has prepared you for this. It has given you the tools you need to respond: to proclaim justice while standing for peace. Long ago the Spirit called you to commit your life to faith. Now you know why. You are a source of strength for those who have lost hope. You are a voice of calm in the midst of chaos. You are a steady light in days of darkness. The time has come to be what you believe.”

Friends, belovedness is our super power, activated by the Holy Spirit.

We are beloved. We can do this.

Amen.

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Acts 19:1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied-- altogether there were about twelve of them.