

The Second Sunday after Christmas
January 4, 2009
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Luke 2: 41-52
The Reverend Sally Johnston

Hear again these words from The Letter of Paul to the Ephesians:

“I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.”

In her memoir *Here if You Need Me*, Kate Braestrup writes about her job as a chaplain to the Warden Service in Maine. Finding lost children in the Maine woods is a specialty of the wardens, and Ms. Braestrup is often called to go out with them, not to search, but to stay in the agony of the waiting families.

One afternoon a six year old girl wandered away from a family picnic in the woods. One minute right there, the next vanished. As Braestrup sits with the distressed parents, they confide to her that they are not churchgoers, as if giving her an excuse to abandon her ministry and leave them to their terror. But of course she stays and offers the best comfort she can in the midst of a wilderness of not knowing anything for sure.

In our Gospel lesson today, Luke tells a story of Jesus as a boy of twelve, slipping away from his parents to return to the Temple in Jerusalem, where he impresses the teachers and scholars of the day with his insight and knowledge. For those of us who have ever been in the situation where the child we thought was right beside us is not, it's easy to identify with how Mary and Joseph must have felt when they discovered that Jesus was not with them on the road home from Jerusalem.

When his frantic parents find Jesus, his mother admonishes him as any terrified and relieved mother would:

“What were you thinking? Don't you know we've been worried sick about you? We didn't know where you were or if something terrible had happened to you. I'm glad you're ok, but how could you do this to us? Didn't

you know we'd be in a panic?" And Jesus responds, "Didn't you know I would be here, would have to be here, doing the work of my heavenly Father?" He is saying to her, "This is who I am."

In this single encounter, told only by Luke, Jesus proclaims for the first time his true identity, fulfilling the divine imperative for his life: "Didn't you know I must do this?" His parents being pious and raising him "right"- as evidenced by the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover – this piety wasn't enough. He had to take on his own relationship with God, his own unique work that could only be accomplished through him.

Even more striking, this is Jesus saying, "Yes!" to all the others who have been telling us about him. As Fred Craddock writes in his commentary on Luke's Gospel: "Jesus now claims for himself [his] special relation to God.... To this point, all signs of Jesus' special nature or mission have been to or through others: the angel, Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah, shepherds, Simeon, and Anna, but now (v. 49) he claims it for himself." [Craddock, *Luke*, p. 42].

In our parish today we'll have the annual Epiphany pageant, where the nativity story culminates in the arrival of the wise men from the East. This story of the Three Kings in Matthew's Gospel is the most common bridge between the nativity stories of Jesus' birth and the Epiphany, the season of revelation. Being Gentiles, the wise men represent the rest of the non-Jewish world, drawn to Jesus as One they worship, too, because he came not for a few but for the whole world.

Jesus' response to his mother is Luke's way of leading us into the Epiphany. He came for the whole world, not just a few and certainly not just for his earthly parents. Who he belonged to, the One to whom he was responsible, was his heavenly Father. And while it may have been the first, it's not the only time Jesus clarified the primary relationship and allegiance in his life: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" he later tells the crowds who follow him. "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26-27).

During Epiphany, our attention turns to following the ministry of the One who claimed his identity and then claimed all of us. It is a time to ask ourselves if we are paying attention to the divine imperatives in our own lives.

There is a story from Hassidic Judaism about a rabbi named Zusia. Once, Rabbi Zusia came to his followers, his face pale, his eyes filled with tears.

- "Zusia, what's the matter? You look frightened!"
- "I've just had a vision and I learned the question that the angels will one day ask me about my life."
- His followers were puzzled. "Zusia, you're pious, scholarly and humble. You've helped so many of us. What question about your life could be so terrifying?"
- Zusia replied: "I have learned that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?'"
- "And I have learned that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Joshua, leading your people into the promised land?'"
- His followers pressed him. "So, what will they ask you?"
- "They will say to me, 'Zusia, there was only one thing that no power of heaven or earth could have prevented you from becoming.' They will say, 'Zusia, why weren't you Zusia?'"

In the dark Maine woods, Reverend Kate Braestrup, Chaplain for the Maine Warden Service, sits with people in their despair not because they believe in her or even in God, but because it's a job that she sees as a calling, and it has become her identity, an identity not dependent upon other's expectations of her, but upon her own understanding of who she is.

Many hours and miles later, when the lost little girl was finally found and returned to her parents, Braestrup described her job this way: "And my whole, lovely job at that moment was to bear witness to rejoicing and to join in the gladness of the coming day."

As we stand on this bridge between Nativity and Epiphany, we're not asked why we haven't become Jesus. Instead, we're encouraged to become the epiphany, the revelation, of our own best true selves, affirming our own relationships with our loving Creator. In doing so, we, too will "bear witness to rejoicing and to join in the gladness of the coming day."

What is the divine imperative to be fulfilled in your life?

How will your light, your true identity, become part of Christ's Epiphany for the whole world?