

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
First Sunday after the Epiphany

The Baptism of our Lord

Year A

RCL



Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Matthew 3:13-17

The Collect

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. *Amen.*

Isaiah 42:1-9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
 my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
 he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
 or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
 and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
 he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
 until he has established justice in the earth;
 and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the LORD,
 who created the heavens and stretched them out,
 who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
 and spirit to those who walk in it:
I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
 I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
 a light to the nations,
 to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
 from the prison those who sit in darkness.
I am the LORD, that is my name;
 my glory I give to no other,
 nor my praise to idols.
See, the former things have come to pass,
 and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
 I tell you of them.

Psalm 29

Afferte Domino

- 1 Ascribe to the Lord, you gods, *
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
- 2 Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his Name; *
worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.
- 3 The voice of the Lord is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders; *
the Lord is upon the mighty waters.
- 4 The voice of the Lord is a powerful voice; *
the voice of the Lord is a voice of splendor.
- 5 The voice of the Lord breaks the cedar trees; *
the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon;
- 6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, *
and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox.
- 7 The voice of the Lord splits the flames of fire;
the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; *
the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- 8 The voice of the Lord makes the oak trees writhe *
and strips the forests bare.
- 9 And in the temple of the Lord *
all are crying, "Glory!"
- 10 The Lord sits enthroned above the flood; *
the Lord sits enthroned as King for evermore.
- 11 The Lord shall give strength to his people; *
the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace.

Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

SERMON

A family of fleas, living comfortably on the haunches of a large dog, were discussing their understanding of the world about them with their children – passing on the wisdom of countless flea generations, just as all good parents do.

“We are blessed”, Father Flea said, “for we live in a place where there is plentiful food, and beneath our feet the ground is warm. Though the winds of winter howl the fur above us keeps us safe.”

“That is so”, replied Mother Flea. “But we are always to remember to be grateful lest the Cruel Claw or the Terrible Teeth make an ending of us.” They were a religious family of fleas.

As time passed, Brother Flea became less willing to accept Mother Flea’s stories of the Cruel Claw and the Terrible Teeth at face value and even came to question the stories of Dog which their parents told them. “I don’t think any of that makes any sense”, said Brother Flea to his sister. “A great claw arriving out of nowhere? Teeth just appearing? It all runs counter to what I can see with my own eyes. I think mom is a little soft in the head. You know how old people get.”

“That’s awful!” replied Sister Flea, clearly horrified. “Mom wouldn’t tell us about the Cruel Claw and the Terrible Teeth if they weren’t real.”

“Just my opinion”, said Brother Flea. “I’m entitled to my opinion, aren’t I?”

“What about the warm ground beneath our feet? The warm fur over our heads and all the good food we want? You think that just happens? Mom says all we have comes from Dog.”

“Yeah...I have never seen Dog, so ... no, I think that just happens. I’m grateful for the good things we have, but I see no evidence of Dog anywhere I go. Oh! and I did some calculations here that show that all this you speak of is just the way things are. We don’t need Dog to explain any of it. I think it’s all just myth and old people stories!”

“You don’t believe in Dog??” Sister Flea exclaimed, shocked.

That exchange, sadly, opened a gulf between the siblings that was only to grow more painful the rest of their lives. Ironically, Brother Flea, though he could never believe in an invisible Dog, developed into a young flea noted for his loving and charitable personality. Everyone who met him was uplifted by him, and he never failed to come to the aid of those in need. His love of life, his gratitude for all those about him, his loving relationships with everyone he met, friend or stranger, was legendary. He even volunteered every week at the Children's hospital, where he comforted children with terrible flea diseases.

Sister Flea, however, became more and more obsessed with doing what she understood she must do to avoid the Cruel Claw and the Terrible Teeth, which she saw as punishment inflicted by Dog on those who failed to believe. She became more and more strident, and more and more bitterly judgmental toward those around her, save only the group to which she belonged, and particularly toward Brother Flea who she chided at every meeting for his lack of belief.

"Don't you fear Dog's judgment?", she asked, incredulously.

"No", he replied, smiling. "I don't believe in Dog, so I don't believe in a judgment."

"Well, why are you forever visiting the sick, and giving to good causes? You wouldn't do these things unless you believed in Dog. You just don't want to admit it."

Brother Flea just shook his head. "I don't know why I do those things. I see somebody suffering and it's like it's happening to me. It's like other people's itches make me itch and I just can't ignore them. Something in me won't let me be."

"It will do you no good!" she shouted. "You are powerless to gain salvation by good works, but only that ye believeth in Dog."

"Sister, I'm not looking for any sort of salvation! I'm just scratching an itch something within me won't let me ignore!"

"Humph!", she huffed and silently prayed for her brother to come to Dog.

He sighed in exasperation. "Sister, everything you do is motivated by fear and judg-

ment. You can't appreciate your many blessings through such a fog of fear. You can't reach out to others because of your need to stand as judge over them. Can't you see that if you spread kindness with the same zeal you spread fear and judgment, how much better it would be for you and all about you? If you could let go of the fear that seems to direct everything you do and instead realize what a blessed place you live in, if you could take pleasure in those who surround you, things would be so much better for you. Now, I have to go. I have a shift at the hospital to help with some children. Be well!"

"Beware that you are not deceived", she retorted, "for the illness of the flesh reflects the illness of the soul."

Sister Flea could be a bit of a load.

One day, Sister Flea was in the midst of a tirade with her brother over his failures to heed her when, without the slightest warning, from above came awful, terrible teeth. Before either of them could react, she was caught up in them and crushed to paste before she could even call out! As quickly as they had appeared, the Terrible Teeth withdrew above the fur, leaving no sign of Sister Flea.

For a moment, Brother Flea stood dumbly, unable to absorb what had happened. Then the horror of it broke upon him like a flood, and he dropped to his knees in heart-rending tears crying out, "Oh my sister, my beautiful sister! If only it could have been me instead, for I have been filled with blessing and you found only fear and judgment! If only you had had more time, I just know you could have come to live into the light!"

We can get terribly connected to our church and our traditions and forget that God calls us to bring light to His Creation. We find ways to forget that we are each given into the care of the other. We fail to let go of our need to judge, so as to open our hearts to the needs of others. To live into the light, it is necessary to connect each day with that urging within us toward love and compassion – the still, quiet one whose passing would not break a bruised reed nor quench a dimly burning wick. That is the working of the Holy Spirit within you. Believe what you like, but act from the Holy Spirit's urging, as

close as your own heartbeat.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Why Did God Create Atheists?

There is a famous story told in Chassidic literature that addresses this very question. The Master teaches the student that God created everything in the world to be appreciated, since everything is here to teach us a lesson.

One clever student asks "What lesson can we learn from atheists? Why did God create them?"

The Master responds "God created atheists to teach us the most important lesson of them all — the lesson of true compassion. You see, when an atheist performs an act of charity, visits someone who is sick, helps someone in need, and cares for the world, he is not doing so because of some religious teaching. He does not believe that God commanded him to perform this act. In fact, he does not believe in God at all, so his acts are based on an inner sense of morality. And look at the kindness he can bestow upon others simply because he feels it to be right."

"This means," the Master continued "that when someone reaches out to you for help, you should never say 'I pray that God will help you.' Instead for the moment, you should become an atheist, imagine that there is no God who can help, and say 'I will help you.'"

ETA source: Tales of Hasidim Vol. 2 by Mar

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Sermon Copyright © 2017 J. Stewart Schneider