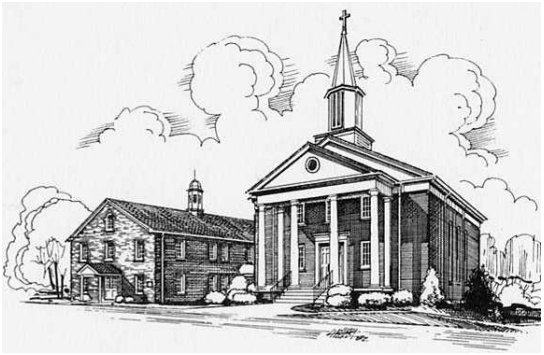
he Lessons Appointed for Use on the

First Sunday after the Epiphany



Year A

RCL

Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17
Psalm 29

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.*

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.

Acts 10:34-43

Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ--he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death

by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

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

In 1992, Robert Redford directed a movie based on the 1976 novel “A River Runs Through It” by Norman Maclean. That image, of a river sweeping us along in its flood, haunts me. The current of that river informs us that it matters how we live our lives. The choices we make matter, for, if we do what we often do and swim against the current, myopically seeking false shores, ultimately all we will accomplish is exhaustion and death. We know this, but still we persist. How are we to do otherwise? Our vision, our perception is so flawed! The situation would, indeed, be hopeless if we were left to our own powers, but we are not. Isaiah reminds us:

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;

Isaiah reminds us that we are called in righteousness. We are children of Him who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth, giving breath and spirit to those who walk in it. Everything is swept along by the power of the river which runs through us. Even Jesus, the Word made flesh, offered Himself up for baptism.

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.”

“Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness”. Jesus, the Word through which all things were made, offers Himself up for baptism, for this is the way of righteousness. A river runs through it and Jesus is showing us the way to ride its waves.

And just like that, I have gotten us into trouble with the tiny word, “us”. Who is “us”? Defining “us” is a major part of the book we call “Acts of the Apostles” or just “Acts”. Acts is the second part of a two part book sometimes called “Luke-Acts”.

The first part, the Gospel of Luke, tells how God fulfilled his plan for the world's salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Acts continues the story of Christianity in the 1st century, beginning with Jesus's ascension to Heaven. It's usually dated to around 80 or 90 of the common era, so the writer had recent history upon which to look. The issue we see the new Christian community struggling with is, "Who is 'us'?"

Jesus was a Jew. End of discussion. Full stop. His Disciples were similarly Jews as were his earliest followers, so it would be easy to conclude that "us" is the Jews. But then the Jews began to reject the followers of this new way. Who is "us" now?

Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ--he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem.

That is the way with rivers. They sweep indiscriminately. Billy C. Clark had a great scene in his book about Catlettsburg in which he described the annual floods of the Ohio. According to Billy, their house would be washed away, but soon another house would float by and his father would lasso it

and bring it to ground. That's the way with rivers. The river had brought something new to the Jews first, but God shows no partiality. In every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. This can come as an upsetting surprise to those who have chosen to view Islam as the enemy, as well as to those of Islam who choose to view Christians in the same way. The river excludes no one from its flood.

Really grasping the power of the river, though, is not easy for mortals. If everything and everybody about you is borne on the flood, it's easy to deny that we are swept away. The Romans and those of the Jewish nation who feared they had something to lose by embracing this new way began to swim

against the tide, seeking false shores and human advantage.

> They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

The witnesses were those "who ate and drank with him". That is us, church. In my home church no service of worship is complete without Communion, through which we again eat and drink with him. We, here, celebrate our relationship with Him once a month. It doesn't matter. We are the wit-

nesses! God raised him and those who ate and drank with him after His raising became the witnesses to the whole world.

A river runs through it and we, who ride its foam, are the witnesses even now to a story too tenuous to have survived as I have said before, but which still bears us onward,

> He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
> nor will anyone hear his voice in
> the streets.
> He will not break a bruised reed
> or quench a smoldering wick
> until he brings justice to victory.
> And in his name the Gentiles will
> hope.

You are called church. Swim with the everlasting current.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

You, who eat and drink with Him, are His witnesses to the world of the river which runs through all Creation. Be that witness!

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

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 Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

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

Sermon Copyright 2019 J. Stewart Schneider