

A lot has happened since New Year's Day! The Friday following, January 6, was the Feast of the Epiphany, one of the seven principal feasts observed by the Episcopal Church. It's always on January 6, the twelfth day of Christmas. We most often associate it with the wise men's visit to the baby Jesus. As soon as they have completed their journey, we can wrap up the whole Christmas business and move on into the season that introduces us more deeply to the One who was sent by God to be the light in a world of darkness, to take away the sins of the world.

The Sundays between the Feast of the Epiphany and Ash Wednesday are numbered as part of the Season after the Epiphany. Between Epiphany and the first Sunday after it, Our Lord Jesus grows up—in just a few days! On the first Sunday after the Epiphany we always celebrate the Baptism of our Lord, another of the seven principal feasts. It marks the beginning of Jesus' earthly ministry, but more importantly, through the account of Jesus' baptism we're reminded of our own baptisms. If we had been here last week, we would have renewed our baptismal vows, repeating the words that articulate our beliefs and remind us of the promises we've made about what we will *do* and how we will *live* as followers of Christ who have been adopted into the household of God.

In today's passage from John, we see the focus shift from John the Baptist to Jesus. Although the Gospel of John doesn't specifically speak of Jesus' baptism, Matthew's account, which we would have heard last week, tells us that when Jesus came to him to be baptized, John resisted, saying "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied to him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness," and then the baptism took place. Afterward, just as Jesus was coming up from the water, John watched as the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descending like a dove, alighted on Jesus. John *heard* for himself the voice from heaven that said, "This is My Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." What he saw and heard affirmed for him that Jesus was, in fact, the One "to come," the One whom John had already been telling people about, the Lamb of God.

When John called Jesus the Lamb of God, he was standing with two of his own disciples, who then left him to follow Jesus. And Jesus asks them a question: "What are you looking for?" No doubt this question resonated with them; the people of Israel had been looking for a Messiah for longer than any one of them could remember...almost since the beginning of their relationship with God, it seemed. The Old Testament relates what seems to be a back and forth, back and forth—covenants made, covenants broken, laws made, laws broken—the Israelites were always looking for the one who would save them and their Savior was spoken of, prayed for often.

Let's look at today's passage from the Prophet Isaiah, the second of four "servant songs" included in that book. This one is written in the voice of the servant, telling of his vocation to bring the people of Israel to God, who had created them. As Christians, we assume that the servant here is Christ, the one who will bring glory to God; but the identity of the servant is up for debate, some attributing it to a specific person from the tribes of Israel, others to an ancient community of faith. Yet the identity of this person is not nearly so important as the task to which he is called, as the Lord says to him "I will give you as a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." This person is called to bring glory to God *and* to bring God's people back to God.

God's people are looking for God, the one who has promised to be with them. They are—again—living in crisis. Their homeland has been scarred by war. Those who are in exile are trying to adjust to a culture unlike their own—not so much how to survive, but as one commentator put it, "learning how to be in relation to others of different faiths, different mores, different understandings." Does that resonate with you? It does with me! Americans in the twenty-first century are also making adjustments, learning how to be in relation to others of different faiths, different mores, different understandings. And for many of us, the adjustment is difficult as we face

a future that is uncertain and often uncomfortable. Perhaps it's time to talk about the elephant in the room! The election of 2016 has deepened existing divisions among us and created new ones. When our new president is inaugurated on Friday, half of us will be cheering, hopeful that he will solve all of our country's problems, and the other half will be weeping, fearful of what is ahead.

Our differences in economic status, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion—and the ways that we interpret them—have all been brought to the forefront of our life as a nation. And sadly, we must now be careful about what we say and to whom we say it because we are unable to talk about our disagreements without wounding, even demonizing each other. We take our cues from the speculations of newscasters and television personalities who are paid to keep things stirred up—and who do a pretty good job of it—and from the opinions of folks we know who are no more knowledgeable than we are. Even those of us who are hopeful cannot know what's next. For many, especially those who are struggling or suffering in other ways, the uncertainty makes this feel like a very dark time.

In C. S. Lewis' *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the ship has sailed into Dark Island and everyone on board is terrified of the darkness. Just as it seems they will never find their way out of this dark and scary place, Lucy, one of the visitors to Narnia, in a desperate whisper cries, "Aslan, Aslan, if you ever loved us at all, send us help now." Aslan, as you may know, symbolizes our Lord Jesus Christ in Lewis' books about Narnia.

As the story continues, Lewis writes, "The darkness did not grow any less, but [Lucy] began to feel a little—a very, very little—better." Shortly thereafter, one of the crew notices a tiny speck of light on the horizon, which seems to be growing closer, though it does "not alter the surrounding darkness...Lucy looked along [the speck of light] and presently saw something in it. At first it looked like a cross, then it looked like an airplane, then it looked like a kite, and at last with a whirring of wings it was right overhead and was an albatross. It circled three times round the mast and then perched for an instant on the crest of the gilded dragon at the prow. It called out in a strong sweet voice what seemed to be words, though no one understood them...but Lucy knew that as it circled the mast it had whispered to her 'Courage, dear heart' and the voice, she felt sure, was Aslan's."

Remember that when Jesus turned and saw John's disciples following him, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" That's a good question for us to consider today, I think. What *are* we looking for? What are we aimed at? What are we after?" Maybe we don't really know. Those disciples didn't seem to know for sure either. When Jesus asked the question, "what are you looking for?" they asked their own question of him. "Where are you staying?" Perhaps they were really asking "What's your position on those things that matter to us? Is there room for us in your future? Can we stay with you?" Jesus said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day," and, of course, for much longer.

As Christians who confess that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior and who profess our faith in his Way, we, too, are called to put our trust in him. And so now I'm going to give you some advice that you didn't ask for, some advice I've already given to several of you privately. Turn off the news channels, or at the least, stop watching or reading those things you know will disturb you. I promise you won't miss much and you can't change them anyway! Filter your use of social media. Unfollow those folks who keep you riled up or fearful. Use the extra time you'll gain to read something that will build up your faith, not tear it down. Forgive those folks who have offended you. And pray. Pray diligently for our country, for our new president and other leaders, and for those with whom you disagree. Turn your mind toward Christ, and keep your heart, mind, and spirit in the Lord. That's what you promised to do at your baptism.

In today's passage from First Corinthians, Paul writes, "God is faithful. By him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." You were, too, beloved. Own it! *Amen.*