

Quinquagesima, February 15, 2015

You might have noticed a strange word at the top of the Hymn Boards this morning: “Quinquagesima.” Marjorie found these labels, left over from many years ago, for this used to be the ecclesiastical term from the Sunday before the beginning of Lent. It literally means “fiftieth,” to acknowledge that it is 50 days until Easter. This makes “Quinquagesima” a sort of “anti-Pentecost;” on Pentecost we celebrate the coming of the Spirit and the birth of the Church, but on this Sunday we begin the preparations for the season of Lent, the time we mark with penitence and fasting. However, in our more modern observance, we have retired Quinquagesima as a yearly observance and moved more to a “Transfiguration Sunday” observance, following the reading from Mark’s Gospel we heard this morning. But I was glad Marjorie found these older seasonal markers to remind us that we are moving into the portal of the most important 100 days in our Christian year, a little over three months in which we encounter Jesus in the full meaning and drama of his life and in which we come to a deeper appreciation of the faith God blesses us with through this encounter with the risen Christ.

Prayer: O God, on this Sunday as we hear your Word from the mountain top, may our hearts and souls be lifted to you, this we ask in the name of Jesus our Savior and friend. Amen.

So today we hear this story about the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain top. Of course, as this story is related in Mark’s Gospel, it is a sort of “bookend” to Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan. Both of these events take place in the wilderness, and in both a voice comes out from the clouds, proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God. In this morning’s lesson, though, this time Jesus has some of his disciples with him, and he is lit up, blazing before them and suddenly surrounded by other notables from the past, Moses and Elijah there talking with Jesus.

The similarity that stands out to me in the account of Jesus' baptism and the Transfiguration is in the message from God. Like at the baptism, in the Transfiguration on the mountain top Jesus is proclaimed as God's Son, but also again, Jesus is given a new Name, Jesus is called "the Beloved." Six weeks ago went we celebrated the Baptism of Christ I preached about the manner in which that new name for Jesus, "Beloved" is a name for us as well: as the baptized, as the followers of Jesus, that is our identity too, yes, you are Beloved, and once again we are reminded that identity has been given to us as a free gift, graciously God has bestowed on us the name Beloved, and I hope over the past few weeks you might have had a chance once or twice to reflect on that name, Beloved, and maybe even to feel that it is part of your identity as well.

Of course, over the past few weeks here at the Church of the Good Shepherd we have been looking closely at our baptismal vows and our baptismal ministry. Unlike most years when we only renew our baptismal vows once in Epiphany, we have been doing so every Sunday this Epiphany season. As I said last Sunday, I am actually getting a little worn out with the renewal of Baptismal vows, but that is something that I find interesting, because it has never happened before since we usually just say them once in a while. But it has been good to use the baptismal covenant over and over again: I have found, and I hope it is true for you as well, that the words, but even more than that, the meaning and sense of those vows has become more engrained in my life: starting first with faith in God, God as we know God in the church, the Trinity, the God who is and God who is the begotten Word and God the Spirit of love going forth. I think that it is important that first we start with who God is for us, because that helps us to keep our baptismal ministry grounded in God, grounded in the one who calls us to our ministry through our baptism and through that unending love for us, indeed, making us too the Beloved.

In addition, the specifics of our baptismal ministry have also become more familiar. We have been surrounded by those particular aspects of our ministry for the past few weeks: I took them down off the pillars, because now I hope they are written in our hearts and minds and souls: “Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers?” “Will you persevere in resisting evil and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?” “Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?” “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” “Will you strive for just and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?”

These are the words that define our ministry, the words that give shape to our mission. These words, this covenant we make and now that we have renewed for our lives, these Baptismal vows incline our hearts and set our lives in the direction of ministry God intends for us to carry out in our day. Now, the Baptismal covenant does not tell us exactly what to do in every situation: of course the circumstances of our lives differ, they are ever changing and as it is written in the Book of Lamentations, it is “new every morning.” As we live our lives, as we carry out our Baptismal ministry in our lives, we can apply these Baptismal vows to the places and to the people we encounter. And I know that you are doing just that: again, let me tell you how amazed I am at the acts of ministry you all undertake every week and every day. We put the white board by the entrance of the sanctuary a few weeks ago to record the ways in which each one of us answered the question “What I did this week to live into my Baptismal Vows:” As I mentioned before, I have been really overwhelmed by the response; from taking care of creation, taking time to thank God for blessings; helping those in need, finding ways make this world conform more into the image of God; each Sunday I look forward to seeing what new marvelous little events of ministry will be recorded. And I think we all learn from this, too. Actually, I know we do because under that one that struck a chord

with so many of us, “I held my tongue,” someone else wrote “Ditto” and there was also a check mark by that, too!

These acts of ministry, these acts of healing, blessing, justice and peacemaking, these small but powerful tokens of kindness and compassion, and they are especially signs of our mission going out and moving forward. This is a season of baptismal ministry because it is also a season where we see the mission of the Church, “restoring all people to unity with God and with each other through Christ,” the mission being carried out and renewed in our acts of ministry in the world. Soon, of course, we move into a new season of the Church year, as this Wednesday we place ashes on our foreheads as a sign of our mortality and penitence, but even in doing so, we enter Lent on the strong foundation of our Baptismal ministry and mission. All the acts of ministry we have engaged, those written on the white board in the back and those hundreds of others that we either forgot to write down or we thought that they were too insignificant to merit remembering, all those acts of ministry and mission have given us a sense of where God is active in our world, what God is up to outside the walls of the Good Shepherd – this is in some ways the real point of what we are doing here, in this season and throughout the year: we come together to thank God for the blessings of love and life and we are then set on a course of taking that same love and life further afield, out into a world so desperately in need of love and life.

And we do all this, we are able to do all this because we are Beloved. As Jesus was proclaimed God’s Beloved at the Baptism in the Jordan River and then again on the mountain top at the Transfiguration, so we too who are baptized in the Name of God are also God’s own Beloved. Loved by God to be the ones to bring God’s love into the world. Loved by God that we might show the love of God to those we meet and encounter along life’s way. And as Beloved, we are a light, lit up with that love made known to the world in Jesus at his Epiphany and

Baptism. During this season of Epiphany, I have used a special blessing at the end of each service for our congregation as we go out into the world to serve in the ministry of the baptized: I have prayed over us: "May Christ, the son of God, be manifest in you, that your lives may be alight to the world." Yes, Beloved, be the light of Christ in our world, be the light of Christ in Barre, be the light of Christ as we carry out the mission of love and reconciliation in our community. Thanks be to God. Amen.