

*Sermon – “Have no fear.”*

As we stumble out of Christmastide, skip over the Epiphany, and look longingly through a pristine calendar towards Lent and Easter, the lectionary readings play an interesting game.

We give the magi 12 days to come to a conclusion and finish a journey that took years to manage. The cycle of lessons for this year then makes a gigantic leap through time - in 4 calendar days - from the gift-giving of the magi to Jesus' baptism by our best Advent friend, that prophet of God's upside-down kingdom, John, son of Zechariah - the baptizer.

I very nearly skipped the gospel lesson set for this morning because I wasn't sure we needed any more of John and his 'unquenchable fire,' but it is the gospel, and we're not supposed to skip the bits that make us uncomfortable.

The sweet sensibilities of Christmas are entirely necessary. We need to understand the extent of Jesus humanity so we can begin to comprehend the lengths to which God is willing to go to be with us - to include us in divine plans - to welcome us into the creative and recreative project that began with the emergence of light out of darkness, and continues even now in each one of us.

But I hope that John makes you feel a little uneasy. I hope that as you imagine Jesus, standing patiently among the crowd, waiting for his turn to be dipped in the Jordan, that you think on what it means to be baptized - to be linked with Jesus in this God-project we call a life of faith...because it's not for the faint of heart.

It is difficult, life-changing work. We are asked to consider our privilege and our point of view from the top of society's pile, and to abandon the idea that we somehow deserve to be blessed. We are required (if we would truly follow Jesus' example) to recognize the humanity of those people that our social structures insist on dehumanizing. And we **need** to do this **right now**.

Each New year usually implies a fresh start, but lately the turn of the year has bought us more uncertainty than cheerful optimism, and maybe, just maybe it's time to kiss the cheerful optimism good-bye, and embrace the opportunity to follow Jesus and encounter God and start changing the world.

*Sermon – “Have no fear.”*

Sound terrifying? It might. It should, even in an ordinary year, and we seem to have run out of ordinary years. So I'm going to invite you to face the uncomfortable message that John offers ahead of Jesus' baptism - and rejoice in the message that pre-dates John by nearly a thousand years, and Have. No. Fear.

Isaiah says things on God's behalf that we really want to believe - things about passing through deep waters and walking through fire. With Isaiah's voice, God speaks to humanity's deepest fears - fear of abandonment, fear of uncertainty, fear of harm, fear of death, fear of the absence of security and protection - and God says 'Have no fear.'

Wow, do we want to believe that.

Speaking for myself, I want to be able to take courage from those words. There's nothing I want more, in fact, than to be able to embrace the holy fearlessness that God offers here..but I know from experience that it is not as simple as accepting and believing and then setting aside all my fear. In fact, the message in Isaiah is about God's accompanying me in my trouble, not about God making all my problems go away.

So on the edge of another pandemic year (I'm taking nothing for granted!) rather than say 'God will deliver me" I'm saying "God will accompany me.'

That's all Jesus ever did - acknowledge that God was with him (and, by the way, with us) - and that idea made everything that came his way different. Jesus' life was not without pain or hardship - not with out challenge or uncertainty - but his was a life lived in the presence of God, which made all the difference.

It makes Jesus worth following - it means, seeing what Jesus endured, that God can be trusted to be present, no matter what

What do we need right now - in light of all that has been, and all that is yet to come? We need to be assured that God is present - that we do not face things on our own. We need to be reminded of the love that triumphs over the grave. And then we need to live as those who are so wonderfully, completely, so lavishly loved. THAT is how God will change the world.