

In Unexpected Places...

The Rev. Whitney Roberson

January 10, 2010: Baptism of our Lord, Year C

Church of the Redeemer

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

*Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22*

Have you ever noticed how God keeps showing up in unexpected places? Like in a stable, for instance; in Bethlehem. I mean, when the three wise men came looking for a king, they looked for him exactly where you'd expect to find a king: in the capital city, Jerusalem, in the palace. What they found in the palace was Herod, a vicious tyrant. The real king, the King of kings, the Son of God— they found in an animal's feedbox in a stable in a tiny village on the road to nowhere. They found God in a baby.

That's one reason I think it makes sense to baptize babies, as we do in our own Episcopal tradition. I know a lot of folks don't hold with that: they say people ought to be old enough to choose God for themselves, and I can see their point. But what these folks forget is that baptism isn't just about our choosing God; it's about God's choosing us. It's about God showing up where we least expect it or when we don't even know it. Baptizing little babies reminds us that God shows up in unlikely places; that ready or not, God is with us.

In this morning's Gospel we have God showing up in another unexpected place: on the banks of the Jordan, seeking baptism. What an odd thing: the one we call the Son of God, the One we say knew no sin, comes to John for baptism for the remission of sins.... I don't understand it. Right along with all the others – the weary, dusty, longing, repenting or just plain curious crowds straining to hear this weird prophet in his camel hair shirt – right along with all these others comes Jesus.... Of what need had he for repentance? What could it possibly mean for God to show up here?

I want to tell you a story about baptism; it's a true story, actually, but it's a little odd because it never mentions water....

Some years ago in a small Mexican village there was a terrible fire. A number of people were killed but one little boy survived. His body was terribly scarred: one of his ears was mostly gone, the flesh on his face was badly misshapen and his eyes didn't close quite right. He was ghastly to look at. The little boy had lost his entire family in the fire, so he wandered from village to village alone, living off whatever food he could scrounge or beg before he was chased away by villagers repulsed

by his scars.

One day he as he ran from yet another village, he came to the top of a knoll and saw in a field below him a group of children playing a game. They were running and laughing; there was a man with them. The boy could tell by his clothing that the man was a priest, the padre: a father. Ah, he thought to himself, this must be the place he'd heard about: the orphanage. He watched the children at play until it was time for them to go back into their little compound. He watched with longing eyes and instead of moving on, he hid in some trees nearby and came back the next day to watch the children and their father. For three days he watched and finally, on the third day, he waited until the children had all run back into the courtyard and the father, who moved more slowly, was just outside the door. Then, the little boy ran; he ran with all his might and fell at the feet of the padre. He looked up into the eyes of the kind man and begged to be taken inside; pouring out his story of the tragic loss of his own family, he begged to become a part of this family.

The priest looked at the boy; he knelt beside him, gently touching his scarred face and saying nothing. Never had he wanted to take in a child as much as he wanted to take in this boy. He looked into his eyes, seeing beyond the scars of his face to the wounds of loneliness and fear deep inside him. But would the other children accept him; would this truly be a family for him if he were taunted and rejected by the others; or would such a life only wound him further?

The priest didn't know.

Asking the boy to sit on the bench just outside the door, the padre went into the inner courtyard. The children were all lined up ready to go into the dining room for supper. He stood before the lines of children and surveyed their expectant faces. The children must have sensed that something had happened, that Father had more to say than the usual mealtime blessing; they were utterly silent.

The priest began; he told them about the boy waiting outside: about the fire and the death of his family, about his life of wandering. He told them about the boy's request... and he told them about the scars and his own doubts. "Oh, no, father," they all protested, "we would never tease him." The priest held up his hand to quiet the children: "You have never seen anyone like this boy," he said gently, looking at each one. And once again, the children fell silent.

The priest walked to the door and motioned for the boy to come. He walked with him to the front of the assembly and there they stood facing the others. The children stared. The boy looked at them and then up at the father ... and then back at the children. Priest and boy waited. No one moved a muscle; no one said a word.

And then, from the very back of one of the lines walked another small boy of maybe seven or eight. He walked right up to the boy and looked him full in the face. Then he smiled shyly and said, "Tu eres mi hermano." "You are my brother." And taking his hand, he led him to the back of his line where the two stood side by side.

"Tu eres mi hermano." You are my brother; you are my sister. Baptism is a sacrament of

belonging; and it's a sacrament of affirmation and empowerment.

You know, we're all wounded. It's true, our scars aren't quite so visible as those of the little Mexican boy, but we're all wounded. What the story of Jesus' baptism tells us is that Jesus has entered into our woundedness: when Christ, who knew no sin, plunges into the Jordan, he plunges right into our sinfulness. In choosing baptism, he chooses to become one with us. He goes right into the water with us, and when we come out, God is in us; when we come out, sin has lost its power and we have become empowered with God's power to accept, to heal and to love.

Do we forget we have this power; do we forget to use it; does our own woundedness dull our memory? Well, yes, we do and it does. At least, I forget; but that's why I'm here. That's why I come back to this Table week after week. "Do this in remembrance of me," Christ said, knowing full well we'd forget.

And I come back here week after week because of you: I'm here, because I need you to remind me that I am loved and empowered. In spite of my woundedness, in spite of my mess-ups – or maybe because of them – I need you to remind me that God has shown up in a most unlikely place: in me! We need to remind each other. You know, life can be a little overwhelming sometimes, so we all need to hear that our woundedness, our limitations, our scars are not the most important thing about us. From time to time, we all need to hear again God's word to us, "You are my beloved child; with you I am well-pleased." The gospel story teaches us, I think, that affirmation empowers.

So, I'd like to invite you to do a very special thing this week: I'd like to invite you to find some way to remind someone that they are God's beloved child. Not perhaps in just those words, but through a word of affirmation or an act of acknowledgment or a gesture of unanticipated kindness. You may not even mention God or church at all. Maybe you'll make a phone call, send a little note, seek out a friend to share what the friendship means to you or stop a colleague in the corridor to say how much you value their work. Let someone know you are "well-pleased" in some small way and in doing so, you become Christ for them, reminding them they are beloved and empowering them to love in response. Yes, God shows up in unexpected places: in each of us and through each of us, in the lives of those we meet every day.

Every time we baptize little ones, we are reminded of God's empowering love. Every time we come to the water of baptism, or to this Table, we are reminded that we belong and are agents of belonging. Every time we look at a sleeping child, every time we look each other or look in the mirror, we remember: God shows up in unexpected places and, in spite of all our scars, says to us, too: "You are my beloved child...."