

Jan 10, 2001
Baptism of Jesus
The Rev. Kathy Crary

1st Sunday after Epiphany

I have two points to make in today's sermon. The first is the word of God coming in the voice of God at the end of the Gospel lesson and what it symbolizes. The second is a practical application of this voice of God story into our own lives.

Have you ever attended a carnival? You know the one with lots of neon lights, a few rides, especially a small Ferris wheel. There are booths with food and games, sometimes a tent housing entertainment and a midway with carnival barkers who entice you this way or that.

One of the games of chance is a shell game, originally with walnut shells and a dried pea or bean. The three shells are lined up and the pea is placed under one of them. Then the sleight of hand owner of the game moves them around. You bet that you can tell which shell has the pea under it. So you set your money down and go for it, thinking you can follow the shell (or the cup or whatever the gamester is using) to win a dollar or two.

Invariably you don't win anything, or it is rare enough that you will drop that dollar or two, not double them. I am under the impression that someone can "palm" the dried bean or nugget and move things around and replace it under one of the two remaining shells after you've picked an empty one. That means all of them are bad choices.

We have disciples who are in the midst of choosing in today's story. John replies he is not the Messiah and the theophany, the appearance of God, marks Jesus as the Messiah. This Gospel lesson tells us there is no shell game; guess which one is the Messiah? Here the message is clear

and this message will be confirmed and repeated in the story of Jesus being transfigured.

Now, looking at this as a storyteller, I want the next chapter and hear from Jesus how he felt with this incredible stamp of approval. That stamp of approval is the second point of this sermon.

A stamp of approval, a confirmation of being in the right place at the right time, a pat on the back, a quick or long-worded message of praise is such an important dimension in the care and maintenance of the Body of Christ.

Elementary teachers will talk about praise and reward for their students, employers can tell stories about recognition and credit being given, especially in a special or difficult project. Volumes are written by psychologists, self help gurus, psychiatrists, geriatric ward nurses, teachers aides and physical therapists about the value of a well-timed and well-placed bit of encouragement.

This proved to be a tipping point in Jesus' ministry. It is written so that we might see him as the beloved of God. We are told to listen to him and follow his teachings and be guided by his Spirit.

There are axioms and phrases and aphorisms abundant in American history that deal with a good word and a kind action. We are told to practice random acts of kindness, seek opportunities to help others, not letting one hand know what the other hand is doing.

Our baptismal covenant asks us to see the face of God, the face of Jesus in all people. So here is my assignment for us: We are on a mission this week to find those people who could use a good word and say it and demonstrate it. Look for folks you have previously overlooked, or you looked right through them. Find the people in your own personal

environment who have done the good work, toiled in unbelievable conditions, produced with outstanding results, came through in a pinch, kept on going when the going got tough.

The word of praise is your assignment. Maybe you won't be the voice of God, but you may make all the difference.