

Incremental Revelation

The Sunday after the Epiphany: the Baptism of our Lord. Year C, RCL. January 10, 2016. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove

In the homily at the Epiphany service last Wednesday, I reminded us all (I've taken note of it before) that God makes use of incremental or cumulative learning in his dealings with us. God works from what we know and understand—what we are able to “get”, as is the phrase “Do you get it?” God works from that and leads us to what is new to us. That's a pretty good way of teaching and learning in general: working from what is more familiar to what is less familiar.

When God wanted to get the shepherds to go to see the newborn baby Jesus, he sent angels to them. They knew about angels; angels were part of their religious tradition. Angels might scare them half to death, but they knew what they were: God's messengers, leading them in a new direction.

When God wanted to get the three wise men to go to see the baby Jesus, he sent a star. The wise men were not Jewish; they were court astrologers from kingdoms to the east of Judea. They were used to looking to the stars for divine guidance. This is an example of God using a religious system he did not completely approve of to get an important piece of work done. In this case, God wanted to signal that Jesus was the person who would make a saving difference, a healing difference, a holy difference to the entire world. So he called the wise men to find and honor Jesus. Which they did by following the star of Bethlehem. They knew about stars. God could use a star to lead them in a new direction.

When God wanted us to understand how the power of the Holy Spirit would change people's lives when they believed in Jesus, he had John the Baptist baptize Jesus. Now, the Jewish people knew about baptism. It was a ceremony where people confessed their sins and went through a ceremonial washing that showed they were now clean before God. But you're going to say to me, Jesus did not have any sin to wash away. And, yes, we do believe that Jesus was born without sin and never did anything wrong. In fact, as the Gospel according to Matthew tells the story of Jesus' baptism (in chapter 3, verses 14 and 15), John the Baptist was very hesitant to baptize Jesus, whom he knew well; they were cousins, after all. John was not at all sure Jesus ought to be coming to him for a ceremonial washing away of sins in the river Jordan.

But Jesus said (3:14-15) that this should be done “to fulfill all righteousness.” What Jesus meant was that his Heavenly Father wanted him to serve as an example for how everybody should act. Jesus thus kicked off the ceremony we now call Christian Baptism, which for us washes away sin, makes us part of the Body of Christ, and empowers us—commissions us, we sometimes say—to go do the work God wants us to do for the life of the world.

Jesus did not need to be cleansed of unrighteousness—that is, sin—nor did he need to be incorporated into the religious community of his time; the ceremony of circumcision when he was eight days old had already done that. But he did need to be commissioned and empowered for his public ministry, which was just getting going. That's what the dove coming down on him meant: the Holy Spirit came down on him not to make him holy—he was already plenty holy—but to help him do the very difficult job he was born for, and to signal that a special phase of his life was beginning.

You see what God did. There was already a perfectly good and well-understood ceremony of ritually washing away sins: the kind of baptism practiced by John the Baptist. The Jewish people of Jesus time understood that ceremony perfectly well. But God wanted to lead them—and all people—to a fuller, deeper, richer understanding of how his grace works to transform our lives. By having himself be baptized, Jesus changed the ceremony from simply washing us clean of sin to also making us part of the Christian community of faith in all times and places and—on top of all that—giving us the power to turn into the kind of people who can know him intimately and serve him effectively.

God's grace has always been like that. God does not change; he has always called people to holiness; he has always called people to transformed lives that glorify him in thought, word and deed. But God has to get the word out; *he* does not change, but cultures and societies do, and his word is new in every new situation. Angels, stars, a washing ritual—God will use what we already know to lead us to a new, good place. Jesus was a new experience for the word; he was good news for the world. How are we—how are you—how am I—going to lead people to know Jesus better? What angel, what star, what ceremony—what in the world at all—is the sign God is calling *you* to follow, the sign God is calling you to offer to other people, showing how they might come more and more fully into the Light of Christ?

❖ *This sermon is a modest modification of the sermon preached on the Sunday commemorating the Baptism of Our Lord in 2012.*