

**Sermon for January 8, 2017 (Baptism of the Lord, Year A)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary**

Texts: Acts 10:9-16, 34-43; Psalm 29; Matthew 3:13-17

Title: To Fulfill All Righteousness

***“O come, Christ the Savior from below, from above!
And infect the depths of earth with heavenly love.”***

Have you been infected by this heavenly love in the depths of your being?
And do you now carry this infection and spread it to others?

These words come from our Gospel hymn for today.

The text of this hymn comes from a Christian group in Scotland (the Wild Goose Worship Group) who is working to re-contextualize the Gospel, to make the good news come alive again in today’s world.

The words of the hymn are meant to be somewhat shocking, surprising.
We don’t often sing about heroin addicts here in church. But we should.

After all, Epiphany celebrates the self-revelation of God to all the peoples of the earth who are lost and suffering and broken.

A new star shines in the night sky! A voice booms out of the heavens!
Water miraculously becomes wine! GOD is doing something new! And EVERYONE must know about it.

Today’s readings bring us two different stories which share a profound common element.

Both the apostle Peter and the Lord Jesus share a remarkable experience.
In their bodies, with their eyes, they saw something.
They experienced something that could not be explained away.

Both saw the heavens open up. Both saw with spiritual vision.
But what did they see? I have to admit that I’m a bit curious about this, especially the Lord’s vision.

What did he see? What does it actually mean that “the heavens were opened to him”? Unfortunately, there is no description given, except that the Holy Spirit came down upon him “like a dove.”

The story from Acts is a bit more descriptive. Peter goes up onto the rooftop at noon to pray. And while he is hungry and waiting for lunch to be prepared, he prays and has a vision. Literally, he has an out of body experience.

Ex-stasis is the Greek word. Out of being. Outside of self.

His vision is fascinating. Every kind of animal and reptile and bird, crammed together on a sheet like a miniature Noah’s ark. And then he is ordered to go hunting!

Three times this happens, as if each Person of the Trinity is speaking to Peter to reinforce the message. Our reading today skips ahead to the conclusion of the story, but in between the scripture says that “Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision”. And you can understand why, can’t you?

What an odd and bizarre experience! And what I wonder is this: do these kind of experiences still happen today? Do people still have visions like this? Profound experiences which impart meaning and knowledge and insight, but which cannot be explained in any rational way?

Well, I myself have NOT had this kind of experience, but I know that many others have.

One faithful soul who was given these kinds of experiences is Harriet Tubman. If you don’t know her story, learn it! I cannot encourage you strongly enough to invest some of your time to understand her story.

Harriet Tubman is one who loved God with incredible devotion, and who was willing to risk her life time and time again to lead others to freedom.

When she did this, when Harriet Tubman was leading others to freedom and when danger approached, God spoke to her and kept her safe.

Of course, she herself was a fugitive slave, a runaway who made it all alone to the safety of the North. But Harriet could not enjoy her newfound freedom while knowing that so many others remained in bondage. So she went back to bring others to freedom.

One night, in the 1850's, when she was leading a group of fugitive slaves in secret through Maryland in route to Pennsylvania, God spoke to her and told her to stop, which she did.

Harriet then asked God what to do next, and she was told to leave the road they were on and turn west. Soon she and her group came to a tidal stream blocking their way. She asked the Lord once again what to do, and she was told that they must cross that creek.

It was March! It was the middle of the night. The air was still quite cold, as was the water. But she obeyed that Voice. Thankfully, the water came up only to her armpits and she and her charges were able to cross over.

Only later, when they arrived safely in Philadelphia, did Harriet learn that a group of armed men had been gathered along the road which they were traveling along, inspired by the promise of a bounty of thousands of dollars to anyone who could catch Harriet and bring her back alive.

Thanks be to God, no one ever did!

Harriet Tubman made at least 19 covert trips back into the lands of slavery. Along the Underground Railroad, she brought over 300 people to freedom in the north. And never once did she lose someone, even though bands of armed men hunted for her night after night.

How was this possible? Because GOD spoke to her and guided her steps!

The first words of that new Gospel hymn are a prayer for the Epiphany feast, asking God to bless us and disturb us.

Have YOU ever prayed that kind of prayer? Asking God to disturb you? Asking God to shake up your world?

This is what happened to Peter. At noon, he prayed and, in response, God disturbed him and shook his world.

It seems that Peter had his life all organized and orderly and proper.

“I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean,” he declared with precision. What is more to the point is that he had never eaten WITH ANYONE who could be considered profane or unclean.

Out of principle, he did not eat with Gentiles, with uncircumcised people.

Without question, Peter’s scruples were sound and above reproach.

Oh, he was devout, after all.

But, he was wrong, and he did not know it!

God wanted far more from Peter than his principles!

At the Jordan river, when Jesus heard the heavenly voice speaking to him, he heard the deepest and most profound message of all.

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

What else could anyone possibly need to hear beyond THIS?

To hear the very heart of God claiming you as a loved daughter or son!

To hear the Father say, I am well-pleased with you.

Now, to be clear: there is only ONE Son of the living God. There is only one Messiah. Only once has the heavenly voice pierced the noise of human society and spoken in this way. Only once, over those banks of the Jordan.

However, the Lord blazed a path which all people are invited to follow.

All are invited to be adopted as daughters and sons in the same family as this Jesus of Nazareth.

Today, when we remember the baptism of Jesus, we pause to renew our own baptismal covenant. This is a ritual which has become quite common in the Church in recent decades. And for good reason.

When Jesus was baptized, the voice of the Father confirmed his true identity.

It wasn’t created at that moment. It was confirmed and declared in a public way.

When we are baptized, the Father confirms our true identity. It is confirmed and declared in a public way. So, to renew our vows is to go back to that crucial, life-defining moment for each of us. And we need to do this over and over again, since it is so easy for us to forget.

It's what we humans do. We forget. We begin to measure our worth and value on the basis of our accomplishments, our productivity, or net worth, or by the opinions of others.

And think about it! If it's difficult for you and me in the Church to remember our true identity as dearly loved children of God, how difficult must it be for those who live without any connection to God to all, and without a community of God's people to remind them?

Remember please that one of the core commitments which we have made here at Saint Mary's for this season of our ministry together is to grow in compassionate care for those who are struggling in life.

And there are SO very many people struggling all around us every single day.

GOD FORBID that we ever simply bask in the privilege of our calling as children of God! This blessing is given only so that it may be shared.

And THAT is what Peter failed to understand.

Why did the Father rip open the heavens and publicly declare Jesus as the Son of God? Why was Peter given this ecstatic vision of a wild animal kingdom? Why was Harriet Tubman protected and shielded and guided by the hand of God against all odds? Why does God claim us as beloved children in baptism?

Why? Because God wants to be known and loved. Think about that. God wants to be known and loved, by all people.

And it is our task to be infected by the love of God, to let people know that they are welcome to come home and find their true peace and freedom in God, no matter who they might be. God, grant us grace to be faithful in this task. Amen.