

GOD BREAKS THROUGH

ISAIAH 43:1-7

LUKE 3:15-17; 21-22

A SERMON FOR REMEMBERING THE BAPTISM
OF OUR LORD AND INSTALLING ELDERS
SUNDAY, JANUARY 13, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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In some Christian traditions, today is the second Sunday of Epiphany. For us, it is the Sunday when we remember the baptism of our Lord. It is also, for us today, the day we shall install three ruling elders. In truth, we are “re-installing”, for all three have served previously with distinction, and have been re-elected to serve as members of the Session.

For us Presbyterians, baptism and ordination to church office are once in a lifetime experiences. We baptize each person but once, whether it be as an infant or an adult, but only once. And we ordain a person to office only once, though we have three ordained offices, that of deacon, ruling elder, and teaching elder, formerly called minister of the word and sacrament.

The first several questions that are asked of persons being ordained or installed as officers are the same. Only the final one, which relates to the office to which the person has been chosen, is different. Thus, when this church calls its next pastor, and he or she is installed to serve this congregation, the questions that are asked will be the same, save for the last.

Baptism, and ordination, are for life. Unless one renounces one’s baptism or ordination, or is excommunicated from the church or removed from office in a disciplinary proceeding, one is set apart by those acts forever. Epiphanies, well, they may be once in a life time, or they may come whenever God sends them.

When I was being examined by the Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery of Florida, prior to my approval as your interim pastor, one of the questions I was asked was if I could add a sacrament to the two we presently have, The Lord’s Supper and Baptism, what would it be? My answer was ordination, for in ordination we are set apart to serve God in special ways. Baptism, Holy Communion, ordination, are acts that set us apart. In baptism, we are engrafted in the body of Christ. In Communion, we are affirming that we are part of the body of Christ. In ordination, we are set apart to serve the body of Christ.

It must have been a good answer, because they approved me.

The baptism of our Lord was not a sacrament for the Christian church was not yet established, but it was a tradition of the Old Testament people. But if it wasn't a sacrament, it was surely an epiphany, a revelation, a time when God breaks through into this world, and we see God more clearly, hear God more clearly, than in ordinary times.

God is revealed in the three persons of the trinity on the day of Jesus' baptism, for we have the Son standing on the bank of the River Jordan while the Holy Spirit descends like a dove and the voice of the Father speaks saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Son, Spirit, Father, clearly revealed, clearly present at the same time in the same place.

The truth is the God as Father, Son, and Spirit is always present at the same time every place, but how we perceive God, how God is revealed to us, may differ. God breaks through to us in different ways on different days.

Over the years, I've heard folks talk about the epiphanies, the revelations, the times God breaks through, in their lives. They'll usually begin by saying something like "I'm going to tell you about something strange that happened to me..." Or, they may say, "I hope you aren't going to think I'm crazy, but..."

Well, I've had some strange things happen to me, and I hope you aren't going to think I'm crazy, either.

God breaks through to me in some amazing ways. Perhaps God breaks through to you in some ways that you've never been able to talk about, because you were afraid folks would think you were crazy.

Well, I'm just crazy enough to tell you about a strange way that God breaks through to me, a couple of ways, maybe.

The first one started a dozen years ago, when I was recuperating from quadruple heart bypass surgery. I was going several days a week for

cardiac rehab in Punta Gorda, about twenty miles south of where we lived in Arcadia. Every day, while I was in the car with the radio turned on to my favorite country music station, I would hear the same song. It was recorded by Travis Tritt, and the title is "It's a Great Day to be Alive." Well folks, when you are recuperating from heart surgery, every day is a great day to be alive!

Over the last dozen years, that song has come to be a message from God to me, a reminder that God cares, that every day is a great day to be alive. I heard it last on December 23. I had just finished the Longest Night Service at St. Luke's, and Polly wanted me to bring home a sandwich for supper, so I pulled into Sonic, and ordered a couple of burgers. While I was waiting, I enjoyed listening to the Christmas music being played over their speakers. And then, suddenly, the Christmas music stopped. And I heard the familiar opening fiddle music to "It's A Great Day to be Alive." I sat there and sang along. And when the song was over, the next song was, "O Holy Night."

God breaks through, in some strange and amazing ways. Why else would my theme song be played in the midst of a Christmas medley?

But wait, that's not all. "O Holy Night" has some special meaning, as well. The weekend before, when about a dozen of us were caroling, we had finished our repertoire, when someone asked the folks we were serenading if they had a favorite. The answer was, "O Holy Night". Now we didn't have the words, we didn't have the music, we hadn't practiced, but somehow we managed to sing "O Holy Night." And it was as though the angels were singing with us. It was an epiphany, a revelation, of God's love, of the Holy Spirit.

God breaks through. God breaks through every time I turn on the LG television set and I read the words "life's good" on the screen!

Why do some of us have these epiphanies all the time, and others never?

Will Willimon writes:

"There are people who complain that they have never been the recipient of an epiphany; God has never said anything, either directly or indirectly to

them. Of course, any epiphany from God is a pure gift of God. We cannot demand, predict, or program such moments.

“However, we must admit that we are modern, North American people who have devised a wide array of resources for evading epiphany. A scientific worldview tends to be closed, refusing to admit any information into the system, any word from outside.

“We get an epiphany and say to ourselves, ‘Must have been something I ate last night.’ Or, ‘That’s a strange coincidence.’ We are so well-equipped to defend ourselves against epiphany.” *Pulpit Resource, Vol. 41, No.1, pages 10-11*

But God breaks through. God breaks through our defenses, God breaks through our hard hearts, our hard heads, and God is revealed to us and God speaks to us, if we but have eyes to see and ears to hear.

My prayer for all of us is that we will see and hear God breaking through into our lives, into our church, into our world.

And to the one who breaks through be the glory, the power, the dominion and the praise, in the church and in the world, now and forever more.
Amen.