

Baptism of our Lord Year A 2025

Renee Nicole Good.... That's the name of the thirty-seven-year-old woman who was murdered on a street in Minneapolis this past week. She was murdered in cold blood by her own government. Perhaps equally appalling, was the government's immediate response to the killing. Both the head of Homeland Security, and the president of the United States, himself, called Ms. Good a terrorist; that she had attempted to run over the ICE agent who shot her through her side car window; that the shooting was justified. That's a lie. We all saw the video. We all saw the truth. The Truth. No condolences to her family for their loss. No assurance of a fair and thorough investigation.

This is a pattern of cruelty that marks the current administration of the U.S. government... and not just cruelty, but blatant dishonesty, another mark of this administration... and such dishonesty and cruelty is contagious; it now infects all three branches of our government; all compromised by the allure of wealth and power. I used to think it was hyperbole to think our democracy was in trouble. But I now believe that we are in trouble... cruelty and violence; graft, and conflicts of interest, and a disregard for justice, are becoming normalized outside the guardrails of our constitution. And our population is infected as well. A majority of the electorate elected a convicted felon, an unapologetic liar, and pathological narcissist as our president. Lord Acton's words ring as true today as when they were written: Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

For twenty one years now, as an ordained person, I have preached about the evils of empire. Many clergy steer clear of that reality, but I was taught that scripture can only be

interpreted in proper context and with honesty; being true to the text and to the world within which that text was written; true to the possibility that the text applies to our own time and place; true to the writer's intentions as best as they can be discerned; to pay attention to the patterns of history which shape us. Throughout biblical history, in both the Old and New Testaments, Empire has been the problem. Israel emerges as a people under enslavement in Imperial Egypt. Their quest for a homeland is thwarted time and again by the designs of empire... the Assyrians, the Babylonians. The prophets one after another even decry the corruption of their own leadership, calling for a righteous one, a messiah, to save them from the oppression of power gone wrong. The New Testament was written in the first and early second centuries when Palestine was under Roman occupation. Palestine was in effect a police state. Imperial troops were marshalled to keep down rebellions. Violence and coercion were the means of control. Jesus of Nazareth, among others, preached about a way of life by which one could live in dignity, in freedom, up and against the oppression of power. Honesty was first; seeing the world as it is; and speaking the truth... and then Love... Love as a practice; the means being welcome, compassion, empathy, justice, non-violence. A dignified way to live with the problem. And yet the problem persists; as it ever has. As systems of power rise and fall; and it may well be argued that ours is in the falling stage; in the pitiless face of empire, the question persists: how then shall we live? What, if any, is our hope?

Today, in the church, is the high feast of the Baptism of Christ. And I believe, sisters and brothers, that baptism is a sign of hope; perhaps the world's hope. In the brief passage

from Matthew's Gospel that we just read, we are let in on what seems a private exchange between John the Baptizer and Jesus. John, the wild and rustic prophet, demurs by implying that he is not worthy to Baptize Jesus, that Jesus more appropriately should be baptizing him. But Jesus insists on being baptized by John, saying that his baptism is proper in order to fulfill all righteousness. The word in The Greek for righteousness may also be translated justice. It is proper this way so that Justice may be honored, fulfilled, brought to bear.

In effect, Jesus is saying that this rite is not so much about him, but about the community into which he is being initiated. His choice is a choice for humility. The community of the baptized is a community of equals. Jesus, not unlike the pilgrims gathered around him, is joining a movement that stands for the good and the true. It is a community that keeps solidarity with the truth in the face of a violent and broken world. In other words, Jesus is not the thing... Jesus will later say in this Gospel, "Why do you call me good? Only God is good." The movement is the thing. Jesus is a model for how we serve the truth; how we live with integrity; how we live in dignity in the face of power that would undermine our very humanity. Baptism is the outward and visible sign that there are those of us in this world, led by the Spirit, who serve goodness, who, as best we can, practice honesty, welcome, compassion, non-violence, empathy for our neighbor, and justice. Our witness as the baptized is powerful because it has the critical mass of community; a witness for the world to see that Truth and goodness are not vanquished by the powerful, but that they live in us, God's people. There is hope in that. That's why our gathering matters; that is why, for

example, public protests matter.... Critical Mass... God's people gathered for the Truth in the flesh... and tyranny trembles.

At our baptisms we become members of the raised body of Christ; bearing the very life of Jesus, the light of truth, for the world. In our collective body; our flesh and blood. And let's get something straight. The insidious division we face in our country right now is not about the left against the right; it's not about republican versus democrat. It's not a matter of perspective, or a mere differing of opinion. The division we face is between those who would serve the truth, and those who would serve a lie. We are a community that testifies to the truth... as advocates, allies, activists.... Our faith is public, an outward and visible witness to an alternative way of life that calls out the Sin (capital S) that finds its way into the structures of our common life... and, don't doubt, the world depends on people such as us.

In a few minutes we will welcome into our fellowship six more pilgrim souls whom we pray will take up the cause. We will pray, literally, from the Book of Common Prayer, that they will have the courage to persevere. Perhaps in these dark days courage is needed more than any other virtue. But they, we shall ever proclaim, are on God's side of things; empowered by the Spirit, the Spirit of Love. The Church, at its best, is nurture for Love, and the artful practice of it. And there is nothing more powerful than Love. Not systemic dishonesty, not tyranny, not violence. Baptism takes love from I to we. We are strong together. In committed community Love becomes exponential, and invincible.

And still, the question persists: What shall we ever do? I say, we will know when the time comes. But whatever we do, we do it as the time-honored, venerable community that Jesus himself, the anointed of God, humbled himself to join. Good people, in Baptism we become stewards of possibility, bearing God's Spirit in whom all things... all things are possible.