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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X2
1 Epiphany (Year A) 11:00 a.m. Baptism
Sunday 8 January 2017

Isaiah 42: 1-9
Ps 29
Acts 10:34-43
Mathew 3:13-17

Baptism at Nuremburg

"We who are many, are one body in Christ" (Rom. 12:5).

What message is God communicating to you at this moment? If you are like me this is a difficult question. But to help I hope to consider an easier one. What is it that we are doing when we worship? What is happening here? What is this all for?

Before really beginning I need to warn you about my state of mind. Late Friday night I heard some tragic news. Before my first day at Grace Cathedral I chose my friend Fritz to be the senior warden, the leader of our old church until they could invite another priest to be in charge.

On Friday afternoon his eight year old grandson fell through the ice on a pond in Kansas. His mother (Fritz's daughter) rushed to save him but both lost their lives. Her husband tried to rescue them and survived. Our old church is a family church. Fritz's daughter was the church secretary and the leader of our church youth group. The whole community is in shock and I ask you to pray for them.

Let me be absolutely clear. I do not believe that in any way God caused this. I do believe that God is with them all and that God will carry them through this to the other side. I spent time with Fritz's whole family many years ago when it looked like Fritz himself was going to die. God was present then too.

When it comes to God it is hard to say anything that makes sense. This is not a problem with God. It is our problem. It is not just that God is bigger, more just, more loving and more complicated than us. It also arises out of our deep tendency to use the name of God in anti-God ways. We cannot stop ourselves.

In the year 1215 while criticizing the ideas of Abbot Joachim of Fiore, the fourth Lateran Council made an important statement. It said, "Between the Creator and creature no similitude can be expressed without implying a greater dissimilitude."¹ Again, the difference between God and us is so great. Any time you compare the divine and the human, you cannot help being more wrong than right. We have to be careful when we talk about God or worship because we so easily change the meaning of these words into their opposites.

The spirit of Jesus, still alive in our own time, constantly turns our expectations upside down. Jesus shows us the real God even as we fall short and put our trust in false gods.

In our Gospel this morning Jesus comes to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. John argues with Jesus. You can imagine him saying, "You're the Son of God. You should be baptizing me!" The first words that Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Matthew are his reply. Jesus says, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt. 3).

After his baptism the heavens open (the Greek word also means unlock) and a dove, the sign of peace, descends upon him. A voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

The first people to hear Matthew's story would immediately recognize that he is referring to the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah promised that a new kind of leader would arise (God says, "in whom my soul delights"). God's spirit would rest in him and he would establish justice on the earth – not through violence ("a bruised reed he will not break") but by suffering himself (Isa. 42). We experience this truth, it begins to be fulfilled, when we draw closest to Jesus.

We baptize our children and adult friends in the name of Jesus so that they may have a share in this power and so that evil, the violence of the world, will never fully own them. We want them to be so full of God's love and power that they do not have to define themselves by hate or fear. When the time of tragedy comes, as it will for each of us, they will rest secure in the confidence of God's love.

What are we doing when we worship? First, I want to point out that worship involves more than merely thinking about God. We are making space in our lives to encounter this holy one. We open the door to the unknown and the unimagined, so that God can make us more perfect.²

I received an email on Wednesday from someone who attended the Christmas Eve service. He was upset because I said that faith is not primarily a matter of believing the right things. When Christianity becomes a way of declaring who is righteous and who is a sinner, who is on the outside and who is one of us, it has taken the violence of the world into itself and become the opposite of what Jesus teaches.

We have a deep tendency to project our categories, our tribalism, onto the transcendent. Don't forget, "Between the Creator and creature no similitude can be expressed without implying a greater dissimilitude." Because we are like this we need worship in order for God to communicate to us. Its purpose is to change what we desire and how we live. Worship puts us in the presence of God.

Let me try to say this in another way. As a gay man the contemporary theologian James Alison has an acute sense for this "us versus them" mentality in which we try to feel stronger by uniting against a common enemy. He points out how our many social rituals are false worship which instantiates this sensibility. You can see it in professional sports, the newspaper opinion page, reality television shows, fraternity hazing, the cult of celebrity, perhaps even the agenda of your company's offsite meeting.

Of all the possible examples Alison chooses Hitler's Nuremburg rallies to show what false worship looks like. Between 1923 and 1938 the Nazi party gathered in Nuremburg for parades and speeches. If you doubt that these displays of power had nothing to do with religion you should see clips from Leni Riefenstahl's (1902-2003) film "Der Sieg des Glaubens." Yes, the film's title could be translated as "Victory of Faith."

Alison points out the expertise of the people who designed these rallies. You bring half a million people together for worship with rhythmic music and marching. They hear slogans. They see thousands of flags, lots of people in uniforms. People lose a little bit of their identity but you give them a new united purpose, a collective persona.³

You build pressure and make people wait for the moment when the Fuhrer appears. The great leader points out how this huge gathering is a sign of a new unity and change, how God has chosen him. He shares a myth about how they have been victimized. He talks about how good hard-working people have been tricked and shamed by their enemies. He promises revenge, that he will not be afraid to use power in order to bring in a new day when we can be proud again. After this the people find it a lot easier to feel contempt for their Jewish neighbors even though they never seemed particularly frightening before.

James Alison says that true Christian worship is the opposite of this. It feels like when someone who cares for us and maybe even is standing next to us at the rally tells us that we don't need to be afraid anymore, that there is enough for everyone, that we can work out our differences. Church is where we can learn to see every person, even the most bizarre of us, as a child of God.

During Christian worship, instead of *being* the victim, we are *met* by the victim. God approaches us in the person of Jesus, the one who suffered for our sake. Jesus teaches that we do not need to be afraid of the truth. Instead of scrambling for power and security, we can give God the glory. We can abandon the myth that we must be defined by who we are against. We can be free from the power of death.

In our world of hacked elections, Arctic oil pipelines, of victims and fear and blame and fake news, in these days when our well-beings seems to depend on the New York Times, this is very good news. Coming to church week after week we are receiving a new self, we are becoming a child of God. Our inability to say anything true about God is overwhelmed in Jesus' embrace of us.

When I first arrived at my last church they fought over everything. My main message to the congregation for the first two years I served there was "we are one body in Christ." This week my friends at our old church sent out a difficult letter announcing what had happened to Fritz's family. It closed with a prayer that Fritz used at all the vestry meetings since I left and the reminder that they remain one body in Christ, united with the miraculous power that even frees us from death.

How will your life be transformed by worship? What message is God communicating to you this morning?

¹ James Alison, "Worship in a Violent World," *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-In* (NY: Continuum, 2006) 33.

² Alan Jones email 6 January 2017.

³ James Alison, "Worship in a Violent World," *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-In* (NY: Continuum, 2006) 36, 44.