

Howard Thurman, theologian, pastor, wrote these words:

"When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart."

Epiphany is stark. When it began to get dark outside, it began to be Advent and then Christmas. As stressful as the Holiday Season can be, it is also festive, colorful, flavorful.

That all ends at Epiphany: As the wisemen bring the gifts to the altar, so all our gifts and decorations are put away.

The house that formerly felt fine, before the decorations, feels bare and desolate, strangely empty. So do we.

We have the incarnation.

God is with us. God is all in all. God is within us. Yet incarnation now feels empty and stark, strangely unfulfilling, not mystery, not magic.

Perhaps that is why Isaiah reminds us about something important concerning the Son of Man, the incarnate one:

He will bring forth justice to the nations.

He will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice on the earth.

Justice is not just the laws, the systems, the way of being just with one another, but it is also the fulfillment of those laws, systems, and ways that ensure that everyone is fed and housed and has enough. That is justice. As Jane Wolfe says: justice is sharing until your neighbor is safe.

In our baptism vows we promise to :
Seek and serve all persons, and to love our neighbor as ourself.

We come to baptism not as an initiation rite, but as a life rite.

We are baptized so that we live as one of the baptized.

That is why it bothers us so much when we see injustice, when we are less than able to bring about the changes necessary so that suffering disappears.

Because, at baptism, when we also repent and are made part of the kingdom of God,

God's heart is in our heart and we cannot abide for others to be in intractable suffering.

Remember the Baptized for Life program that I have been working on? The basis of that whole initiative is that baptism is FOR LIFE, for our whole lives: that we enter into the baptismal sacrament and are therefore appointed to do the work of the vows: to live according to the promises we made or that were made for us at our baptism:

1. Continue in apostles teaching and fellowship
2. Persevere in resisting evil and repent
3. Proclaim by word and example the Good News of God
4. Seek and serve Christ in all persons
5. Strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being

Every day we rid ourselves of that which holds us back from fulfilling those vows. Every prayer

we say, every conflict we mend, every child we love, every piece of art we create, every letter to a congressperson we write, every moment spend in caretaking, every loving moment of devotion, every advocacy for life and health for others, every self and other healing moment, every expression of using our giftednesses, every encouragement we give to others, every moment of love and charity....we are living into the baptismal vows and the baptismal vows live in us.

It does not feel amazing, or like we are living in the kingdom. It feels like life.

Look around. Epiphany seems stark.
There does not seem to be a lot of magic.

And yet, that is when the magic of God in Christ begins

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Jesus' public ministry begins at his baptism: at that moment, when the heavens open and he receives the naming of God. This is he with whom I am well pleased, it all begins for him. Maybe we read this story every Sunday After Epiphany because this is the Sunday when it all begins again for us, this work of finding the lost, healing the broken, feeding the hungry, releasing the prisoner, rebuilding the nations.

To do this means that we step out of our circle and find folks in these categories: the lost, the broken, the hungry, the prisoner.

We find, heal, feed, release, rebuild, bring peace, and make music.

Find, heal, feed, release, rebuild, bring peace, make music.

Person by person, step by step: we who have celebrated the incarnation become the incarnated ones and bring the fulfillment of Isaiah into the world. We take on the cloak of the Son of Man

And

1. bring forth justice to the nations.
2. faithfully bring forth justice.
3. not grow faint or be crushed until we have established justice on the earth.

Amen