First Sunday after Epiphany Baptism of the Lord

January 10, 2021 (recorded January 6) Year B/All Saints Church

Genesis 1:1-5 Acts 19:1-7

Psalm 29 Mark 1:4-11

Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Amen

A few weeks ago, I learned that the members of our E*f*M (Education *for* Ministry) group are reading *The Sabbath* by Abraham Joshua Heschel, a twentieth century orthodox rabbi, Hassidic, a professor of Jewish mysticism, and an activist in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. If you recall, there’s the iconic picture of Dr. King walking in the Selma March, with John Lewis and Rabbi Heschel and others, arm in arm.

I have read many of Heschel’s books, and not only is *The Sabbath* one of my favorites; it’s one of my favorites of all the theology books I’ve read. And that’s saying something.

Heschel gave me a new way to look into my faith. Rather than seeing God resting on the seventh day, he saw God creating on the seventh day. **God created rest**, *and* *this last day was the pinnacle of his creative acts*…. This pinnacle of creation, the seventh day, did not reside in things, or humans, or even a world, but rather in rest…in time - a time to reflect, to see anew, to enter into sacred moments as a way to restore, to know, and to consider.

Rest in the Spirit is what defines and restores our humanity: “And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy.” This is the last verse of the first creation story, when the word *qadosh*, (holy) appears for the first time.

The seventh day is holy because that is the day God gave the world a soul, since without our capacity to ***rest*** in the knowledge of the spirit, we wouldn’t even know we have a soul.

Rabbi Heschel is clear: It is not only we who long for a day of rest, but the Sabbath spirit that is lonely and longs for us. God is in search for us. We are the mate of the Sabbath, and each week, through our sanctification of the Sabbath, we marry the day. In other words, the world’s survival depends upon the holiness of the seventh day.

In that way we are co-creators. Every week, especially on the Sabbath, is a chance for resurrection; to see the glory of the Lord.

Dr. Heschel, a rabbi, ironically, helped me to see the beauty of our Christian liturgical year marked by seasons… Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost, all marked by reflection, by prayer, by rest. Holy Time, Sanctified.

We are in the Season of Epiphany, following our star in faith that will lead us to the place where Jesus is to be found. It is the time of the year to recognize that we have a star to follow and we will be wise if we follow it.

And if Heschel were here, he would remind us that the star seeks us out as well…. because ***we are needed*** if glory is to be perceived. It’s the covenant of Sabbath.

If I’m honest with you, I need this season right now, to ***make the time*** to search for glory, to believe in it. To not let the despair of our world right now to rest only in tragedy, heartbreak, failure, or even worse, indifference. How do we follow the star of hope?

The founder of Hasidism, and one of Dr. Heschel’s guides, Baal Shem said, “Replete is the world with a spiritual radiance, replete with sublime and marvelous secrets. But a small hand held against the eye hides it all.”

So true. He continues, yet even if the small hand is removed, “of what avail is an open eye, if the heart is blind?”

How can we let our heart see the glory of the world? We need to rest in the Season of Epiphany (which means insight) as a way for the heart to see.

There’s a reason that the first Sunday after Epiphany is the Baptism of our Lord. As Jesus rises out of the water, and we’re rising with him, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him, and a voice from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

We are born in glory, as children of God. God has created you as you are. God cherishes you. God longs for your companionship. God has plans for a relationship with you that will last forever, a love affair that will only grow in its intimacy with you. God can’t get enough of you. In fact, you make God’s day. You are the apple of God’s eye. God’s love for you knows no end, and that love has always been, from the creation of the world.

If we think of God like this, we will find ourselves in images of love, God gazing upon us. And as we rest in that reflection, in our own Sabbath, we are able to center ourselves in our own dignity and worth and to love others.

Jesus is coming, from a long distance, from Nazareth of Galilee to the River Jordan to be baptized under God’s loving gaze, as God’s well-beloved son.

He is not traveling all that distance to rid himself of sin. He does not imagine himself as sinful, not worthy, less than, not up to snuff, ugly, dumb, or lazy.

And guess what. Neither are we. Jesus does not want us to come to baptism with a burden of shame and unworthiness. That would be like holding up a small hand against the eye that hides the glory of you, the glory of the world, the glory of love.

Not to say that there isn’t sin in the world. Plenty of it. We don’t have to look too far to know this is true. And not to say that there isn’t a need for repentance in the world. There is a reason there are so many at Jordan River, being baptized by John.

But it’s not because they were sin or that you are sin. It’s because they found, deep within their own center, the glory of God’s love for them, beating as their very own heart, and they wanted to reflect that love, and not the death blows of poverty, violence, murder, heinous acts of cruelty, or ignorance. To be baptized means to “turn away” from the death blows of a sinful world, and to face life and love, over and over again, and to believe in “spiritual radiance.”

Jesus was drawn to baptism, and he asked to be baptized; he desired to be baptized because he was accepting that in a sinful world, his stance was to rest with God, a holy act; to live in surrender, an openness to God’s will; and to see a world “replete with sublime and marvelous secrets.”

When Jesus heard, "You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," Jesus's life changed forever.

Today you are invited to walk into the baptismal waters with Jesus, with the expectation that your life will be changed forever, as you rest in the Spirit of God, a holy and sanctified act, resting in the nurture of the life of the Holy Spirit within. One of the gifts of Epiphany- allowing the star within that is seeking you out to connect with your precious kernel of life.

Today God calls a world into being. And through baptism, Jesus calls us into being.

To see the Epiphany mystery: When Jesus rises from the waters, the world rises with him. Amen.