

IN GOD'S HANDS

Epiphany 2 – Cycle C: Is. 62:1-5; 1 Cor. 12:1-11; Jn. 2:1-11

In Martin Luther's Morning and Evening prayers, he ends both of them with the words "into your hands, heavenly Father, we commend our bodies and souls, and all that is ours." He recognizes that there is much in human experience that is beyond our control, and that our wellbeing is dependent on God's mercy and grace. In the morning, Luther asks for protection from sin and evil so that his actions throughout the coming day may please God; in the evening, he asks forgiveness for all the wrong that he has done throughout the day, and then asks for protection through the night.

Like Luther, I expect that most people of faith, when they commend themselves "into God's hands", do so for guidance and protection and healing. To have faith is to radically rely on God and to turn to God in prayer for everything that we need, especially those things that lie beyond our control, and concern our wellbeing and the wellbeing of those over whom we watch and care. Luther's favourite psalm proclaims that "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble" (Psalm 46); and in giving prominence to that psalm and its message, I believe Luther seeks to incorporate into Christian spirituality a radical reliance on God's care and protection through all our days. The first step of faith, as it were, is placing all that we have and all that we are into God's hands; loving and trusting God for all that we truly need.

This morning's readings, however, take us to the next level. They teach that the hands of God do much more than guide, protect, and heal; that like our own hands, the hands of God fashion and create, arrange and organize, push and lead and hold. That entrusting ourselves into God's hands is to enter into a dynamic relationship with God that offers much more than guidance, protection, and healing. It is a relationship that promises transformation, renewal, restoration, and rebirth. It is to invite change into our life, because God is anything but a benign presence. Many years ago, Frederick Buechner, writing of Moses, said something like "When God places the divine hand on you, your troubles are just beginning." Moses, you will recall, went from being a murderer in exile to becoming the liberator of the Hebrew people. Years earlier, Joseph went from being a foreign slave to becoming prime minister of Egypt, second only to the pharaoh. This is the kind of trouble God creates: transformation, restoration, renewal, and rebirth. Commending ourselves into God's hands is to open ourselves to an adventure, the Bible teaches us. One of our prayers expresses this condition of the faithful with amazing precision: we often pray,

O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

(317, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*)

In this morning's First Reading, Isaiah records the intention and will of God for the Hebrew exiles in Babylon. Their exile, the longer it continues, increases their distress. They long to return to their homeland, but they are weak and dispersed. Many have assimilated into the Babylonian culture. Prophets like Isaiah seek to address the remnant of faith they may have in the One who called them into being as a people and who rescued them from slavery in Egypt. The prophets proclaim the God of Israel as the God of their transformation, restoration, renewal, and rebirth. In this morning's reading from Isaiah, God becomes the bridegroom and Israel is God's bride. And as is typically the custom even today, the bride often receives a new name. This bride's former names, received through the experience of exile, are Forsaken and Desolate. The bridegroom's vows of love and faithfulness give Israel, the bride, her new names of My Delight Is in Her and Married.

Name changes have power because they participate in our deeper identity. I've known a few people in my lifetime who have changed their first name in order to be more truly the person they wish to be or know themselves to be. In the Bible, a change of name signifies a change in a person's destiny: Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah when God enters into covenant with them; Jacob become Israel when God enters into covenant with him. In the New Testament, Saul becomes Paul following his conversion from persecutor of Christians to baptized Christian and then apostle. And in fact our

baptismal rite is, among other things, a naming ceremony. Through the grace of Holy Baptism, we receive not only the name our parents give us, but also the name “child of God”. There is power in a name, and the Hebrews in exile recognize that in their renaming their transformation, restoration, renewal, and rebirth is imminent. And the hand imagery is present in this passage as well: God says to the people, “You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.” They are in God’s hands.

In today’s Second Reading, another transformation has taken place before Paul’s eyes. He observes that once they were pagans who were enticed and led astray to idols which, as he says, “could not speak”. They have been transformed, however, through their baptism into Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Now, they have a living relationship with the living God and are discovering in this new relationship what Paul identifies as gifts of the Spirit: wisdom, knowledge, faith, the ability to bring healing and work miracles, the ability to prophesy, discern spirits, speak in tongues, and interpret tongues. The gifts, of course, are impressive, but Paul gently reminds them that what is really at work here is God creating a community of faith. He writes, “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” In other words, they are called to use their gifts for the building of Christian community. Especially with our 20-20 hindsight, we can see the hand of God forming what will later be known as the church, the Body of Christ given for the deep needs of the world. And I find it interesting that we routinely use this passage from Corinthians at times of renewal and rebirth in the life of the present-day church. If the words seem familiar to you, it is because they are part of our installation rites – for Church Council, but also for lay ministers, field placement students, pastors, and bishops. There are varieties of gifts, Paul writes, given for the common good. In every congregation, the hands of God are at work through people who use their gifts for the common good.

I love this morning’s Gospel because, like so much of John, it connects with the larger theme of God’s love for people in Jesus Christ. For John, Jesus is God’s final and definitive Word on the mystery of human existence. In Jesus, John tells us, the ambiguity of life is removed and the meaning of life is clarified. Jesus calls us into discipleship and in that new relationship we find blessing.

This morning’s Gospel, however, communicates that we shall also find ourselves changed. The miracle of Jesus’ changing water into wine is exactly as John describes it – a sign! It is a sign revealing Jesus’ glory; it is a sign that inspired faith in his first disciples. But it is also a sign of his ministry; it is a sign of how the reign of God transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary; it is a sign of how God’s hands recreate, redeem, renew, and transform us, and through us, the world around us. Change begins from within, and we learn from this morning’s Gospel that Jesus’ presence with us, through the living, breathing Word of his gospel, creates the conditions for our transformation. The sign is water changing its essence; the sign is the finest wine imaginable; and the miracle is that wedding in Cana of Galilee is the world we live in. Christ himself is the ultimate sign of the hands of God at work in our world through those who are his disciples.

And our work is identical to God’s work: as God calls forth our re-creation, rebirth, renewal, redemption, and transformation, so are we to bring re-creation, rebirth, renewal, redemption, and transformation into the world around us. We become God’s hands into which the care and protection of the world is entrusted.