



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: January 11, 2009

Why We Can Believe, Shannon A. White

By now many of us have taken down our Christmas Trees and placed them out for pick up, or, if you're like me, who went fake this year...it's all put neatly back in the box and ready for next year.

An article from the Salt Lake Tribune that I found on Beliefnet.com lists the woes of clergy who have helped prepare their flocks for the Christmas season, only to quickly find themselves again in what we call in the liturgical year "Ordinary Time"...that period of the church calendar which begins next week and takes us up until Ash Wednesday and then from Pentecost all the way until Advent again. Today we still wear the liturgical color of white...which signifies the celebration of holy days...this being Jesus' baptism.

The Rev. Rick Lawson, dean of St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral in Salt Lake City says 'So many people see it (Christmas Day) as the end of the festivities, but in the church it is just the beginning of a celebratory season.' For many branches of Christianity, that season culminates on Jan. 6, which is known variously as Epiphany, or Twelfth Night. Taken from the Greek for "manifestation," Epiphany began in the Eastern Orthodox Church in the third century to honor Jesus' baptism (which again, is what we celebrate this morning). In that tradition, the Epiphany service includes a blessing of water as a symbol of renewal and regeneration. Individual members can take some of the blessed water to their homes to drink and to use for healing. The Roman Catholic Church and, later, several Protestant churches, shifted the focus to the story of the magi, the wisemen from the East who followed a bright star to the manger and brought gifts to baby Jesus. Today, these faiths use the day to celebrate Jesus' introduction to the world beyond Judaism.."

Interestingly, this morning's text has fallen in the lectionary readings more than once in the three plus years that I have been here at RHCC....That is interesting to me...and I have preached on it here before. The text of Jesus' baptism, I believe is one of the most important texts in all of his ministry...because it makes the case for...precisely... why you and I "can" believe.

Immediately after John baptizes Jesus, Mark's Gospel takes us right into the thick of things in his ministry. Jesus is driven out into the wilderness and upon returning, the disciples are chosen. So what is it that is done in those 7 verses which we read this morning that is so important and makes us able to place our trust and faith in God versus anything or anyone else?

First of all Jesus was open and he had an encounter with the living God. In this passage, the Spirit of God came down to him...descending like a dove. Jesus was open to that experience in his life, presenting himself for baptism with John.

None of what we build here in our community really makes a personal difference if we have not had a personal experience...an individual encounter with the living God that has touched our lives in some way. It's next to impossible to maintain a sense of faith over the long haul based on someone else's experience. The good news is however, that God is always looking for ways to reveal Godself to each of us... right where we are. Even here this morning. Are you open?

Secondly Jesus was recognized for who he was and claimed...as God's own beloved son. This identification impacts the rest of his ministry, because we know that anything Jesus does...has God's handiwork written all over it. The people who encountered him, then, would know that what Jesus did had God's seal on it.

Thirdly Jesus was loved... not for what he did, but for who he was...the Spirit of God came down, named him and said, "This is my beloved in whom I am well pleased." Jesus had yet to do anything ministry related... and yet God makes this statement that was meant for Jesus' ears and ours too, so that WE may also know that we are loved by God without reservation. Do you believe it?

I'd like for us to think for a few moments about what may sound like some very silly questions. Why do YOU believe in God? Why have you chosen the path of following God through faith in Jesus? Why do you come to church every Sunday week after week? Or, for others, why do you NOT come?

You may think you know your own answers right off the top, but let them sit for a bit. Why does it matter that we believe? We all believe in something, don't we? The question is what is it that we believe in?

I found an editorial in the Sunday New York Times back on December 28 by none other than Ben Stein. I'm not particularly a fan of Stein's but his article caught my eye and I couldn't help but cut it out thinking ahead several weeks to the sermon this morning. It was entitled "They Never Told Me He Lost Money" and the subtext was "Why investors have wanted to believe in a Bernard Madoff."

In my other life, as a reporter I unfortunately had to cover the local angle of the Madoff story since Rene-Thierry Magon de La Villehuchet, the French financier was from New Rochelle. He, as you know, tragically took his life in his Madison Avenue office after losing well over a billion dollars of his clients' money...too engulfed with shame over having been duped by Madoff's elaborate ponzi scheme. And of course, many here in Fairfield County have been affected too...losing millions if not billions in what is being called the worst financial scandal in history.

Stein says, after he was once approached to invest with Madoff and declined many years ago, "I have never heard of an entity that could make money in all kinds of markets consistently, year in and year out. Yet we continue to believe that there will be one."

Many of us do...don't we...have a sense of magical thinking that somehow our security lies somewhere outside of ourselves...perhaps in money, or in our reputation, in the things we have or in the person we have chosen as a spouse or in the world we have built up around ourselves. For some, if that life situation changes, they can become devastated and desperate. News came out this week of German Billionaire Adolf Merkle's suicide and back in September, Kirk Stephenson of the London private equity firm, Olivant ended his life as well. Dr. John D. Lucas, assistant clinical professor at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical College, said that the men may have "considered themselves to be worth as a human being what they were worth at the bank."

Again, let us think for a moment in the quiet of our own hearts. What would you do if suddenly everything were stripped from you? Status, financial security, family, perhaps health? What would you be left with...what

would I be left with?

Stein continues, “We are more than our investments. We are more than the year-to-year or day-by-day changes in our net worth. We are what we do for charity. We are how we treat our family and friends. We are how we treat our dogs and cats. We are what we do for our community and our nation. If you had \$100 million or \$100 thousand a year ago and now you have a lot less, you are still the same person...Losing and making money are not moral issues so long as you are being honest. You may have a lot less money as this year ends than you did two years ago. But you are just as good or bad as you were then. It is a myth that money determines who you are, and if you have gotten over that myth by now, then 2008 will have been a very good year.”

Our scripture passage says...oh yes, we are far more than even all of that...we are God’s very own...and nothing can separate us from that love. We may do all sorts of things in our lives, to make our recognition of that connection difficult, but God in Christ still loves us.

This morning, as we remember Jesus’ own baptism, we have an opportunity to reconnect and deepen our own faith. Shortly we will have join together in the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, an intimate act we do together to open ourselves to God’s presence and ministry in our lives today. As we prepare for this time of fellowship, I invite you, in the quiet of your own seat... to rededicate yourself this year to the God who calls you by name as beloved son or daughter...and who says to you...”With You, I am well pleased.”