

**Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany
Year C**

[RCL] Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Psalm 29

As long as most of us have been able to remember, modern day so-called prophets have been crying that Jesus is coming sometime soon in our lifetime. For that matter, any quick glance at Church history reveals that generations of folks have been anticipating the Second Coming. Even St. Paul thought that Jesus was going to return during his generation. But here we are 2,000 years later still awaiting the coming of our Lord. The Church continues to be filled with expectation, not unlike those who listened to John the Baptist, wondering if the coming of the Messiah is nigh. It seems humanity has a deep-seated longing for someone to come and deliver us from all that is wrong with the world. The world's three great monotheistic faith traditions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – all eagerly await the coming of the One who will rectify the world's wrongs, set the record straight, and establish a reign of righteousness.

It's easy to see why the people gathered around John mistook him for being the long-awaited Messiah. He was a mighty preacher, boldly proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God, and warning people to repent of their sins in preparation for the coming of the Christ. John, like Jesus, challenged the status quo of his day. He called the leaders vipers when they came seeking baptism from this man in the wilderness. John didn't pull any punches, and in the end, it proved to be his undoing. Nevertheless, Jesus proclaimed that John was the greatest among all prophets. John baptized with water, but he prepared the way for the one who would baptize with fire.

On this day, the first Sunday after the Epiphany, we are still waiting for the Messiah to return. Many are busy trying in vain to interpret the signs of the times in order to determine when the Christ will return as promised. The world has become a very scary place for many of us. Terrorist attacks are happening around the globe, wars and rumors of war fill the airwaves and electronic media, natural disasters seem to be on the rise with ever increasing ferocity, and governments struggle to find solutions to what ails their countries. Each generation sees their time as being worse than any other time in history with fear and foreboding. People are divided over what is the best approach to solving all that is wrong in our world. Even in the Church, Christ's followers cannot find consensus. Division is rampant and faith seems to be replaced with fear.

In light of all that burdens our souls in today's world we are called to remember that Jesus will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire. The Paraclete comes not to only provide us with comfort, but to empower us to carry out the work of the Lord in a world that is desperate for answers for what ails it. God is separating the wheat and the chaff. Despite all the disorder in the world, God is still firmly in control of the situation. Nothing is happening that God is not aware of. God's Beloved Son has already won the victory for us, we only have to learn to walk in that victory as we face all the challenges that lay ahead.

It helps to keep in mind that the world has always faced great adversity. When the Mongols invaded the Roman Empire the Church was convinced that was the end. When the Norsemen invaded Europe, wreaking havoc wherever they landed, the Church was certain that was the end.

And when the Ottoman Empire was at the gates of Vienna, once again the Church was prepared for the end to come. No generation has lived that hasn't witnessed great social upheaval, indescribable suffering, or cataclysmic disasters. But the world continues to spin, history rolls on, and the Church must learn to rise to the occasion and proclaim that God's love knows no boundaries. The end may be near, but we are called to be overcomers in Christ, not merely survivors who are barely hanging on until the Lord returns.

Today's Gospel states that Jesus will separate the wheat from the chaff, but how do we know the difference? What separates the wheat from the chaff? Fear. When we allow fear to rule our decision-making process we give into irrational thinking and actions. Fear tells us to shut the alien out, to deny mercy to those seeking asylum, and to hoard our resources out of fear that there won't be enough. Fear compels us to distrust our neighbors, and arm ourselves before we leave the relative safety of our homes as if we are going out for battle and not just a simple trip to the store or movie theater. Fear, if given into, can become our prison master that prevents us from living our lives to the fullest as intended by God.

Those who have been empowered by the Holy Spirit have nothing to fear. As Scripture reminds us, "If Christ be for us, who can be against us?" Fear is the opposite of faith. Fear tells us that God isn't big enough to handle our problems. Faith, on the other hand, says that God is bigger than all our problems combined. Jesus, the one God calls his beloved, conquered fear on the cross and He is coming back. But until that day comes, we are called to occupy the land (spiritually speaking). Perfect love casts out all fear, and love is perfected a little more in us each time we face a fearful situation and declare God's victory over the situation.

The love that gives us power over fear is rooted in God's beloved – Jesus. Just as God is well pleased with the Son, so too is God pleased with all his children who put their trust in His grace. This is the central message of baptism; the old being has been buried with Christ in baptism and the new creation has been resurrected. This is a spiritual truth that must be worked out during our lifetime; nevertheless, we can be assured that God's love for us is eternal and trustworthy. No trial or tribulation we may face can separate us from the love of God.

Christ has come into the world to set us free from fear and spiritual oppression. He will come again as he promised. Until that day comes, let us continue to manifest God's love for all His creation as we continue to love and serve Christ in all people. Amen.

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