



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Epiphany 1 (A)

#### Johnny Appleseed Christianity

[RCL] Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

The Epiphany Season is a time in the church year when we focus on many epiphanies, shinings forth of the glory of Christ, among them his manifestation to Gentiles as an infant, the time at Cana when he supplied wine for a wedding, and his mountaintop transfiguration shortly before his death.

On this first Sunday of the season, we recall yet another epiphany, how Jesus declared his solidarity with suffering, sinful humanity by accepting baptism at the hands of John—not because he needed it, but because we needed him to be baptized for us.

This baptism is a manifestation, not only of Christ but of the Trinity. Jesus is there in the river. The Spirit descends on him like a bird. The Father's voice announces from heaven, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." God reveals glory at this baptism—big time.

God also looks to reveal glory through each of us, and to do so big time. Did you know that? To each of us at the font, the Father says, "This is my Child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

In our baptism, God affirms us and commissions us and tells us to be fruitful. Go forth into the world and minister even as Jesus did. Make a difference. Let us consider two forms that this big-time ministry, this revelation of glory, can assume, whether we speak of persons or communities.

One form is Jack and the Beanstalk Christianity. Seeds are planted that seem to grow overnight, like the gigantic plant in the tale of Jack and the Beanstalk. Sometimes in the Christian life, wonders do happen suddenly.

But far more often, God's glory is manifested through our ministries in a form we can call Johnny Appleseed Christianity, named for one of the most popular figures in American folklore.

Do you remember Johnny Appleseed? Here is how folklorist Richard Dorson describes him: "Barefoot he wanders through the frontier forests of Ohio and Indiana, looking for likely places to plant his nurseries, clad in a mushpot hat and a coffeesack garment."

“Johnny never married, because his youthful love went west and died before he found her. He himself dies reading the Bible while apple blossoms swirl to the ground outside his door.

“A modern Saint Francis of Assisi, Johnny lived to befriend humanity and replenish the earth. The Midwest owes her lavish orchards to Johnny, and more than one starving pioneer blessed him on finding apple trees in the wilderness.”

There really *was* a Johnny Appleseed. He was born John Chapman in Massachusetts in 1774 and died near Fort Wayne, Indiana in 1845. He spent his adult years traveling through what was then the wilderness of Ohio and Indiana, planting apple trees for future generations.

The historical Johnny Appleseed was not quite the romantic figure who appears in American folklore and popular culture. Although his contemporaries found his appearance odd, and he traveled alone, he became a fairly successful businessman, accumulating twenty-two parcels of land amounting to some twelve hundred acres. He did not plant the very first apple orchards in what was then called the West. Nor was he solitary by nature, but spent much of his time with his half-sister and her family.

Yet he had this in common with his legendary namesake: he planted countless apple trees and he kept moving west as the frontier receded. Both the legend and the man represented sweet fertility and the fecundity of the broad American wilderness. Johnny Appleseed has gained a secure and happy place in the American imagination.

Some years ago, Richard Donovan suggested Johnny Appleseed as an image for how we Christians live our lives.

So how is Johnny Appleseed Christianity practiced? We keep moving, always with our eye on the changing frontier. We plant seeds, lots of them. At the end of the day, the scene doesn't look all that different. But at the end of the month, the year, the decade, it may be that something is growing, something worthwhile: an apple tree that may bear fruit well into the future. Planting apple trees is an exercise in hope.

That is what we are here to do, most of the time at least. Keep moving. Plant seeds. Do not expect Jack's enormous beanstalk, but honor the big picture, the one that stretches through the generations. Tarfon, a rabbi from a long time ago, makes this same point when he advises us, “It is not up to you to complete the task. Nevertheless, you are not free to desist from it.”

Much of the time, maybe all the time, ours will be Johnny Appleseed Christianity. We keep moving with the frontier, planting seeds whenever and wherever we can. We realize that God gives growth over time and others will enjoy the harvest, even if we do not. This Johnny Appleseed Christianity offers its own glory to God, for every apple is a miracle.

We find the Johnny Appleseed approach in how Jesus functioned. This is apparent throughout the gospels, but especially in his death and resurrection. There, Jesus is not so much the planter as he is the seed, broken and buried in the earth, awaiting the third day, the resurrection morning. He dies and is buried, even as we are in baptism, and we rise together with him.

We Christians are the fruit of Jesus the apple tree. We become Johnny Appleseeds in turn, scattering seeds so that there will be more trees, more apples. Thus, Christ multiplies and bears even more abundant fruit over the course of years. The land bears a surprising harvest.

What does this require? The apple seeds available to us and the places to plant them are limited only by our courage and our imagination. Plantings occur in the personal lives of family members, friends, and people we barely know. Plantings occur in neighborhoods, communities, and institutions. They happen as people from across the globe join together in worthwhile enterprises, day by day.

God's imagination is great. Consider all that exists throughout the vast canyons of space. Consider all life forms in their diversity and splendor. Consider especially how the Holy One entrusts to us the planting of seeds to bring forth good fruit. That this happens, that it happens even today, bears witness to the greatness, the audacity of the divine imagination. Not only Jesus is entrusted with seed to scatter across the broad earth – that task, that opportunity, is entrusted to us as well.

May we go forth, then, as people who leave the font and always keep moving with the frontier, people who plant seeds at every opportunity, and anticipate a harvest too big for our time alone. This too will amount to an epiphany, a shining forth of divine glory.

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