

## **Affirmations – January 18, 2009**

Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11; Psalm 29

We all understand how good it feels to be recognized for something we have done in life. It doesn't matter whether it is something big or something small. When someone says something like, "That was a wonderful dinner;" or, "My, you look nice today;" or, "We appreciate the way you have helped us survive these difficult economic times;" or, "You certainly were the right person with the right gifts and talents for the job of landing that plane with no loss of life;" or, just, "Thank you for thinking of me," we feel validated as human beings and we know we have value to another person or group of persons. It is wonderful to receive such affirmations. Struggling through life without them takes much of the joy of living away.

True, most of us do not do things to be thanked for them. We understand that we are not to go through life telling everyone who will listen, at least for a few moments, about how great we are and about how we, alone, have done marvelous things. Instead, we are to cheerfully and patiently go about serving others, according to the tenets of our faith, while expecting nothing in return for our efforts. If we choose to live in this way, words of kindness and praise become all the more precious and delightful and often surprising.

These human affirmations look pretty small and insignificant when we consider the story of the events surrounding the baptism of Jesus. Before he even arrived on the scene at the Jordan River, John was telling those who followed him, that there was someone coming who was greater than he was; someone who would baptize them with more than just water but also with the Holy Spirit.

As many of us know, John is thought by some to be the cousin of Jesus, Elizabeth's son. Whether this is true or not, matters little to the significance of the story. The important part of the baptism is the appearance of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus rises up out of the water, affirming that he is God's beloved son, the one with whom God is pleased. That is a powerful affirmation. We need to understand that adult or believer's baptism in those days, and in ours, signals a death to the old way of life and the beginning of a new way. Immersion under the water represents a burial of the old and being raised up represents a rebirth into new life.

Some believe that Jesus led a pretty ordinary life up to this point, not knowing that he was such a treasured person. They believe that at the time of his baptism he was "adopted by God" and began his public ministry following a time of reflection and fasting in the wilderness. Most of us don't worry about this. We just cherish the beautiful story Mark tells in which he stresses his belief that Jesus was special and that he led a life from this point on that truly changed the world.

The role of the Spirit appears throughout the Hebrew Scriptures as well as in our New Testament. The story of the creation tells us that, "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." In other translations this is the "breath of God" or the "Spirit of God." This Spirit affirms all that was taking place in this story of the beginning. It comes from God and goes where it will, making things new again.

The hymn we just sang notes the presence of the Spirit from the beginning through our time. It is that aspect of God that ignites us and moves us forward to do things we never thought we could do. It calls us to “Awake from our slumbers and rise on your wings,” just as it beckoned Jesus to do the same thing.

Not one of us is Jesus. That is probably a good thing. But we are people who claim to follow him and live by his teachings. As his disciples, we are called to continue his process of the revelation of the nature of God to others we encounter. We are to look at them through the eyes of God with understanding, acceptance and patience.

In our little reading from the Book of Acts, we saw Paul telling those who had been baptized by John that they needed to feel the affirming power of the Spirit to make their baptism valid. So, they were re-baptized and the Spirit came to them.

That was very nice for them to have such clear-cut rules and to have the Spirit appear on demand. For us, it seems, the Spirit comes in different ways. It does not always come on a blast of wind, or in flames of fire, or in a voice speaking to us. For this, I believe we should all be grateful. For most of us the knowledge of the presence of the Spirit of God comes in gradual ways. It comes through looking at our scriptures not just once, but many times. The understanding of this aspect of God comes as we are able to accept it and begin to see the way it works or could work in our terribly troubled world. It comes when we wake up to the way we treat those around us and decide we certainly could do better. It comes affirming where we are in life and who we are but encouraging us to greater heights.

We all have it within our beings to respond to what we sense is the activity of the Spirit within. As in all matters in life, we can choose to act or we can choose to remain the same. Because God has granted us “freedom of will” the choice is always ours.

Those words from our hymn remind us of this:

*“You call from tomorrow, You break ancient schemes.*

*From the bondage of sorrow all the captives dream dreams;*

*Our women see visions,*

*Our men clear eyes,*

*With bold new decisions*

*Your people arise.*

*Spirit, Spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness calling and free,*

*Spirit of restlessness, stir me from placidness, wind, wind on the sea.”*

-- Amen