

Christ (Episcopal) Church, Valdosta, GA
Epiphany 1, January 10, 2021
The Rev. Dr. James C. Pace

Good Morning, and welcome (once again) to Christ Episcopal Church. My name is Jim Pace and I am honored to have this opportunity to preach in this pulpit and officiate at the altar while Fr. Dave Johnson is on sabbatical for the next several weeks. By way of introduction, I go by any number of names and I answer to most of them: Dr. Pace, Dr. Jim, Fr. Pace, or just plain Jim, whatever is comfortable for you. And so, together, we begin.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

(Note: *Patient names in the following sermon have been changed to safeguard their identity.)

The Feast of the Epiphany was this past Wednesday, January 6th. And what a roller-coaster week it has been. Late Wednesday afternoon and evening became an Epiphany that none of us will soon forget. More about that in a moment.

Today begins the First of six Sundays in the Epiphany Season where we celebrate the manifestations of Jesus Christ our Lord. It is in these manifestations that we find both Jesus' humanity and his divinity. In Jesus, we will see the glory of God, we will see God face to face. And that's pretty awesome if you think about it. It's almost as if God delights in showing us who Jesus is, who God is, **if we have the eyes to see**. With the incarnation, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And now the adult Jesus begins his ministry with his baptism. And when Jesus arose out of the water, the Lord God proclaimed: "This is my Son, my beloved, **in whom I am well pleased**."

Sometimes a good story can reveal sentinel events that make differences in our lives. And one of my favorite stories about the power and the meaning of baptism comes from my ministry as a hospice chaplain in Nashville, Tennessee, some years ago.

It began on a Friday morning when I ventured by car into a remote part of East Nashville. I finally found the house, one of 6 arranged on either side of a steep, down-sloping, dead-end street which overlooked Nashville's industrial district. I quickly scanned the intake sheet: the patient was only 62 years old and had terminal lung cancer most probably caused by his extensive work with asbestos. The dilapidated house that bore his address was surrounded by a chain link fence bearing a faded, ominous sign that read: *Beware of Mean Dog*.

The entrance to the chain link fence had long since rusted and fallen off its hinges, resting in a pile of weeds and litter. I crept up the sidewalk peering to the left and the right with visions of a vicious, rabid, foaming Doberman or pit bull that would jump out and attack me. And suddenly, there he was, dashing out toward me from under the house at full speed. He was a wire-haired little terrier mix with short legs and a furiously wagging tail!

I was also graciously greeted at the front door by Mrs. Biggs*. She had greyish hair and wore glasses with pointed edges that had once been home to many rhinestones. She pulled me on into the house where several other dogs and cats welcomed me. Her husband was also just inside the entrance, in the living room, bed-bound on a hospital bed. A single, naked light bulb with a pull string hung from the ceiling. The Biggs* hailed from a Primitive Baptist Church tradition with no current church affiliation; the funeral home had been selected, the casket chosen, and the burial plot was secured in a small cemetery in North Nashville. Pretty much all seemed ready. Check. Check. Check. I thought this might be a quick visit.

Then the patient's wife said to me, *and I quote*: "Preacher-man, we all been steady-a-wonderin'-somein'-fierce if you would baptize our Dallas*? He hain't never been baptized and we're all worried about him. Ya see ... his life hain't been all clean and tidy-like." I want to repeat that last image for you: "Ya see ... his life hain't been all clean and tidy-like." I replied

that if Dallas desired to be baptized, I would be honored to help. Dallas has difficulty speaking but he was nodding, yes, emphatically, seemingly, pleadingly. Mrs. Biggs said: “Can you do it now?”

I said that I could, but things looked like we could wait a day which would give me time to gather the needed supplies and would give her time to notify her family and friends. After a bit of thought, she said “ok”.

The next day, Dallas Biggs* was baptized. In attendance were his wife, a handful of family, his hospice nurse, the nursing assistant and social worker, and various dogs and cats. We padded his bed from top to bottom with leak proof bed pads so that we could cover his body with soaking wet, warm towels symbolizing full body immersion in water, a practice observed by his tradition. The water of baptism was then poured over his head with pads over his pillows to keep everything dry underneath. Prior to the service, we talked about what baptism means: The symbolism of drowning in water, sin being washed away, the old way of life dead, and then a new life resurrected in Jesus, emerging from the waters as a brand-new creation of God. *“This is my child. My beloved. In whom I am well pleased.”*

It was then, out of the corner of my eye, that I saw something strange. Slowly meandering over to the bed and the sounds of our voices was a pitiful, little tabby kitten that had been born without eyes. Mrs. Biggs rescued the kitten after finding her discarded on the side of the road, wondering aimlessly and scared to death. She told me the kitten was now everyone’s favorite and was learning to feel her way around the house without too much problem. Two of the dogs had taken special interest in her and would help her to navigate. It was then that I began to process all that was going on around me. And suddenly, that home, the people, the animals, everyone and everything inside, took on new meaning for me. This was church! This was a

welcoming and loving home that had plenty of room in its heart for a little blind life that had been tossed out to meet certain death. This for me was such an incredible symbol of the baptismal event. And a man who had never graduated high school, surrounded by loving souls, had just been proclaimed an anointed Child of God, in a hospital bed in a room with one naked light bulb that fully illuminated God's unfathomable love. To me, at that moment, in and through baptism, I saw God's power and love like never before. That baptism made every difference to that family, and especially Dallas. Mrs. Biggs later told me they had never rested better than that night and that Dallas died peacefully a few days later.

This past horrific week, if we allow it, can also reveal to each of us the power of baptism. Baptism always reminds us that we have a way to go in regard to our humanity. To quote Mrs. Biggs, not one of us lays on a pristine white sheet of life-lived perfection. Our lives aren't always "clean and tidy-like." We are all born into this world blind to something. If we take our baptismal vows seriously, we learn valued ways to grow and better respect the dignity of every human being. Four days ago, Epiphany (note the irony) revealed that we are not one country, we are not one people under God. And contrary to what many people were saying, namely: "This is not who we are as Americans" or "this is not the way Americans behave." I'm sorry to contradict. But yes, it is! We witnessed it on videotape. No matter how ugly the truth, it is still the truth. There remains much in this world that needs to be drowned in the waters of baptism. Justice is not the same for all people in America. There remains among us an unacceptable tolerance of deceit, lies, deeply ingrained racial privileges framed most recently in white nationalism. Many of our brothers and sisters are not respected, not to mention treated equally. Our baptism boldly proclaims: Truth matters. Rhetoric matters. What we do or do not do matters. And if we allow ourselves to really press forward, baptism carries a much stronger and deeper

truth that we must acknowledge. If in baptism we understand ourselves as “loved sinners” by a God who loves us unconditionally, we must then be courageous and ask ourselves: how do I personally, block that love from its truest expressions? How do my baptismal vows make a true difference in who I am on a daily basis? What are my unconscious or conscious biases? Baptism reminds us that Christ is present in all persons. We just have to have the eyes to see. Like Mr. Biggs, and like what happened several days ago, we realize that maybe we have some growing to do, some needed changes that will allow us to learn even more about Jesus and take hope in his divinity *and* his humanity. Because his example proclaims that in the waters of baptism, the old life of sin is dead, and one is raised to a new level of hope and creativity. And with this, we see that light bulb of God more intensely than ever. As a community of faith united in baptism, we take courage in our supporting each other and affirming our commitments to truth, mutual respect, inclusion, belonging, peace, and true justice. The world needs us because of the power of our baptism. And whenever we manifest that power in and through Jesus, it is **then and there**, and **there and then**, we hear God whisper: “...in you, I take delight. In you, my beloved, I am well pleased.”

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.