

From baptism to resurrection
Mark 1:4-11 & Acts 22:6-16
January 10, 2020

Though we celebrated Epiphany Sunday last Sunday the real Epiphany day was on last Wednesday, January 6. This year's Epiphany Day would be remembered as one of the darkest days of American history with the riots in capitol in Washington DC. For Christians, Epiphany day is for remembering and celebrating magi who follow the light of God and dedicate themselves to the worship of God who breaking through humanity in love and full of grace. But sadly, on Epiphany day of this year, some Christians flying the flags of Jesus marched to the darkness, not to the light. Gospel of John says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." Last Sunday when we read the story of king Herod's killing of young boys in Bethlehem right after the story of magi worshiping Christ child, we wondered how that dark carnage of political powers against innocent children possibly happened when the light of God was already revealed in Jesus. We wondered where God was when Herod's soldiers killed children and what Epiphany really meant in human reality in that situation. Didn't you wonder that? But I want to remind you and myself that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. The Bible doesn't say the light chases out the darkness or conquers darkness. It doesn't say because the light shines there is no darkness, no evil, no sin, no pain and suffering. That's how the killing of young children happened after the birth of Jesus and the Bible doesn't hide that dark story. Darkness was there but didn't overcome the light. No matter how dark human reality is, the light shines in the darkness. That's Christian faith of Christmas and Epiphany. Because the light shines in the darkness, we have works to do as the followers of the true light. Howard Thurman, a black Christian theologian who lived another dark time of our nation's history wrote a poem, "the work of Christmas." Let us hear it.

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

How about you and me? What do you do, and how do you do your work of Christmas in our current reality?

There was a man sent from God to do and to show the work of Christmas. His name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. He was preaching in the wilderness and baptizing people. The amazing thing about John for me is that he knew who he was and for what he was called. He was famous and powerful. Big crowds went to the wilderness every day to see him and to listen to him.

People were desperate to find hope and willing to follow John as their hope. He could declare himself as the hope of his people and his nation. But he didn't. He said, "I am not the one. The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and unite the thong of his sandal." Then, one day Jesus came to him and was baptized by him. John did his work of Christmas. When Jesus came out of the water, something happened that never happened before at any baptism. The heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove and a voice saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Visually there is sky opening and a dove coming down. And aurally there is a voice telling God's love story for Jesus, proclaiming he is the son of God. Interestingly, the scene with the sky opening and a voice coming is later appeared again to Paul on the road to Damascus. But this time it is resurrected Jesus who is appearing and speaking to Paul.

On that day, a great light from heaven suddenly shone about Paul and a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Even in that terrifying moment, Saul asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The voice answered, "I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting." He visually saw the true light, and heard the voice telling him that Jesus was one with persecuted Christians. It was Jesus' love story for people who followed him and suffered the pain of persecution. In this experience Paul was totally convinced that Jesus was the son of God and God resurrected him. And it was the greatest love story of the whole universe among God the Father, his beloved son, Jesus Christ, and the world that Jesus loved so much. Later whenever he was questioned about his apostleship, Paul answered that he actually met the risen Christ who was with God. For Jesus, his baptism was the beginning of his public ministry, the work of Christmas and for Paul his encounter with the risen Christ was the beginning of his missionary ministry to gentiles, which was his work of Christmas.

We have to remember that the proclamation at his baptism that Jesus was the son of God was a dangerous political statement. No one could be claimed as the son of God except the Roman emperor. We may think, "Oh...that was a spiritual statement, not a political statement," but in the ears of Roman empire and its followers there was no spiritual statement daring to proclaim anyone the son of God. From the beginning, Jesus' work of Christmas was filled with dangers because his light shone in the darkness. And later when Paul was convinced and believed Jesus of Nazareth was risen and the son of God, his work of Christmas was also filled with toils and dangers. He was falsely accused, beaten, and prisoned almost everywhere he went. But he kept pointing the light in the darkness. Since his conversion experience, he lived his life and did his work while having his eyes fixed on the resurrection of Jesus. Both Jesus and Paul with many other disciples of Jesus were executed by the hysterical fear of Roman empire in the same sense that Herod killed innocent children in Bethlehem on Epiphany.

The gospel of John says, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." That's God's work of Christmas. Now we have our work of Christmas to do. I believe our work of Christmas is lifting the light up in the midst of darkness while our eyes fixed on resurrection. Until we get to resurrection, we have work to do here: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people, and to make music in the heart. Our baptism is the sign of God's wonderful works for us and at the same time it is a sign of our commitment to our work. Now I want you to prepare water in a bowl or a cup as a reminder of Jesus' baptism and our baptism.