

GLORY BE!

Sermon for Epiphany 1B, The Baptism of Our Lord: Gen:1:1-15, Ps 29, Mk 1:4-11
LPC, 1/11/09

What's the matter with preachers today?

Probably most of you have some ideas about what the problem with preachers is. They preach too long, they don't preach enough, they are too loud, too soft-spoken, too intellectual, too touchy-feely, too fierce, too happy-clappy. Most of these are matters of taste. No one preacher is going to please everyone. But when preachers fail not only in terms of taste but also in terms of theology they are really in trouble.

The most common theological fault among preachers is that we tend to focus on what people ought to do, instead of what God does. When this happens our people leave church with a sense of duty. Leaving church with some sense of duty is not an entirely bad thing, but it does a disservice to both God and humankind if not complemented and indeed overshadowed by God's deeds and God's glory.

Emphasizing human duty over God's glory does a disservice to people because it gives them the "what" without the "why." Why should you love God and love your neighbor? Just because? Duty is a poor substitute for love.

Concentrating on what people need to do rather than what God does is a disservice to God because God is so much more than a moralist, an enforcer and a judge. So very, very much more. Describing God as someone who wants you to behave in a certain way is like describing me as a woman with a half-moon shaped scar on her left calf. The description is technically accurate but so partial as to be grossly distorted.

So what is God if not moralistic and judging? So much more! God is wonderful, active, creative, glorious, strong, beautiful, holy, powerful, playful, generous and enormous. That's just a partial list, derived from today's Bible readings.

A homiletics professor of mine suggested that to combat the preacher's tendency to focus on human obligations, we ought to go through our Bible verses and underline all the verbs that pertain to God.

What happens if we do that with today's lessons? In today's lesson from Genesis, God creates, sweeps, speaks, sees, separates and names.

In the Psalm, God is particularly active. God thunders, breaks, splits, shakes, strips trees, sits enthroned, gives, and blesses.

And in the Gospel account of Jesus' baptism, God tears open the heavens and descends.

In all of these passages God's actions are big, broad, powerful. As a lover of language I relish all these strong, picturesque verbs. The biblical writers and redactors are saying, "Look what God can do! God is more powerful than nature, more powerful than the forces of nature. God can manipulate not only earth, but the heavens. That God does not always manipulate earth and heaven is not the point. We know God can because God did. This is what the scriptural testimony tells us.

If we believe the scriptural testimony, how can we not stand in awe of God? Is it not marvelous what God has done?

Some of you may know the ACTS acronym. ACTS is shorthand for a prayer discipline. Balanced prayer, say the proponents of this discipline consists of Adoration, Confession, Thanks and Supplication. Of these four, Adoration is probably the least understood. We know what it is to name and repent of our sins. We know what it is to give thanks. And we know how to ask God for things. Do we know what it is to adore God?

To adore God is not only to love God but to acknowledge God's greatness and glory. Let us not forget how great and glorious God is.

I had a theology professor who claimed that God's distinguishing attribute is not God's love but God's glory. I am not sure I buy this totally, but I can see one thing: humans can model their loving on God's loving, but no one can come anywhere close, in either quantity or quality, to God's greatness and glory.

God is great. God is glorious. To say more would be to drift into that common preacher's problem I spoke of at the beginning. So I will only add: Look what God has done! Glory be to God!