

January 13, 2008

Semper Reformandi

As we heard from pastor Jason last week, we have entered into a new season of the church year called Epiphany. Epiphany means, "to be made known". It begins with the coming of the wise men. Jesus was made known to them through the star. The traditional scriptures during Epiphany therefore focus on Christ being made known as the promised Messiah. In our gospel this morning Jesus is made known through his baptism. This being made known is done in an indirect way when John the Baptist says, "I need to be baptized by you and you come to me?" Here's John, the greatest prophet of all acknowledging that Jesus is greater than him. He is the redeemer or as John later says, very directly in John 1:29, "Look the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." But you can't get more direct than with what happens immediately after Jesus is baptized. The Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove and God himself speaks and says, "This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased." Yet, Epiphany is about much more than God, the prophets, a star or Christ disciples making Jesus known as the Messiah it is also about making Christ known to others and the change that is needed for that to happen.

The Great Reformers had a phrase for this "Semper Reformandi" or always reforming or changing. The more we continue to understand that we have not arrived and the more willing we are to adopt the humble approach that we and our churches are in need of continual reformation, the more our churches and lives come to reflect the God preach. This was a lesson or an attitude that the apostles and the early church had to learn. Let me set the stage here. Early in his ministry Jesus sent out his disciples to, "preach this message: the Kingdom of heaven is near". But he qualified it; he narrowed the field of whom they were to go to. He said, "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel." In a nutshell go to the Jewish people. This is what the disciples heard and what they followed. Then when Jesus ascended into heaven he told them to go and make disciples of all nations yet, at the same time he also told them, "Do not leave Jerusalem but wait for the gift my Father promised." The disciples were focused on Jerusalem and the Jewish people there and abroad. They were not taking the gospel to other people or other nations, rather, they went to other nations as Jesus said but preached to the Jews who had settled there. This is the background of our New Testament reading today.

In Acts chapter 10 God gives Peter a vision with a message. The message is go to the Gentiles and preach the good news to them. God then sent him to the house of Cornelius, a Centurion who was, "righteous and God fearing". Peter makes it very clear what his feelings were like in Acts 10:28. He says, "You are well aware that is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him". Yet after his vision and hearing Cornelius' story, Peter says, "I know realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what is right". Semper Reformandi Peter was changing. Semper Reformandi Acts 10:44, "While Peter was still speaking these words the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message". Cornelius and all who were with him were baptized by the Holy Spirit and with water in the name of Jesus; now that's a great change.

What a great story for us here at Zion so early in the New Year and in the season of Epiphany. It is a story of change, reformation on account of the Gospel. Peter and the other disciples had a mission but God opened their eyes to a larger mission a greater ministry to areas that they had never dreamed of. In this New Year we who follow Jesus should keep our eyes and ears and hearts open to where God may be leading us. I know many of you may be thinking oh I know you're talking about the preschool. As I considered our reading this morning, yes that was the first thing that came to my mind. But Acts 10 is just the beginning of quite and adventure in ministry of the early church as they went to places and spoke to people that they had never planned on. Who knows maybe there is a new ministry in our congregation that needs your leadership? Maybe our time and talents can make a difference in the lives of others in our community. Maybe it is time for us to learn more about the needs of others and then pray that we will be led to serve in some new way. Maybe it is time for us to dedicate more time to the study of scripture with fellow believers so that God's spirit may give us new understanding and strength in faith.

The season of Epiphany is about things being made clear. What better season to pray to God and ask that he would make our mission and calling clear to us; even if it means change and surprise. Semper Reformandi always changing by the grace of God and for the sharing of that same grace.

Semper Reformandi, Amen.