

“From the Beginning” -- Reverend Murray Richmond—January 12, 2014

When I was in high school and college I rode my bicycle a lot. In the ninth grade I went to a private high school which was about 30 miles from my house, and in the spring I got up early and rode my bike to school several times a week. I would spend Saturdays riding my bike about town, and people recognized me as the kid with the orange Gitane Tour d’France bicycle. One of my heroes at the time was a home town kid who had ridden his bicycle from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska to Tierra del Fuego in Chile, from the top of North America to the bottom tip of South America. He wrote regular dispatches from the field, which were printed in the local newspaper, and which I read with great envy, wishing that I could do that one day.

I also rode a lot in college. My parents lived about 45 miles away, and on nice weekends I would ride to their house. In the summers I worked in Charlotte, North Carolina, and lived in Monroe, about 30 miles away, and I would often ride to work, or just ride to Charlotte for the fun of it. I once did a hundred mile trip in one day, to Myrtle Beach for a weekend.

I met a fellow cyclist in college, although I did not get a chance to know him well. It was in my philosophy class, and I could tell he was a cyclist because he wheeled his bike, a rather well ridden bike, into class. I went up to him after class and we talked for a while. His name was Keith. I asked if he did a lot of riding, and he said he used, but not so much once he started school. It was hard to find the time. I agreed, and told him how much I used to ride, and we talked about getting together for a weekend ride.

We never got to do that. He missed a few classes, and then a classmate came to me one day and asked, “Did you hear what happened to Keith? He was coming out of the university on his bike, and got hit by car. He died yesterday.”

When I read his obituary, I had an epiphany about Keith. I realized who he really was. He was Keith Jackson. HE was that guy who rode his bike from Alaska to Chile. I felt really foolish about my pathetic attempts to impress him with my little 30 and 50 mile bike trips. And I really wish he had the chance to ride together.

I had an epiphany. Today we are in the season of Epiphany, which started last Monday. Epiphany means revelation or manifestation. When we have an epiphany that means we just realized something, usually something very important, and usually we realize it suddenly, because some piece of information was revealed to us. In my case Keith’s real identity was revealed through a news paper article.

In the church, Epiphany pertains to the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God. Now, two thousand years after Jesus, we are used to the language about God having children, that we are children of God. Every week we pray to God, our Father, but in Jesus' day, this was pretty radical stuff. You don't find that kind of language in the Old Testament. It is hard for us to wrap our heads around just how radical that was in Jesus' day, just like it is hard for our kids to wrap their heads around the notion that in the past cell phones were a sign of great wealth.

There are two major symbols for epiphany—the Star that led the wise men to Jesus, and the Baptism of Jesus. Both were divine signs that Jesus was more than just a good man—he was the very Son of God. And he was the Son of God in a very different way than we are children of God.

The star was a divine presence in the sky that was open for all to see, but only for a few to understand. Some historians believe it was not a single star, but two planets that were in conjunction in the constellation of Leo around that time. Every one could see it, but only the wise men from the East knew how to interpret it. Some revelations of God are like that. We all see the same thing, but a few are able to see the work of God in that thing. Sometimes we may be hit by a particular insight, something that may even change our lives, but which has little or no effect on others.

When I look back on my life, I can see many incidents which were clearly part of the work of God in my life. But not everyone else sees those incidents the same way. The problem with following a star is that everyone sees the star from a different perspective. I see the stars from the extreme north, and they look a little different than they do to people who live at the equator.

This is what is called special revelation, special epiphanies. They are not meant for everyone. And they can be hard to interpret. Only a few saw the star and knew what it meant.

The baptism was different. That was a general epiphany. Jesus came to John, and John baptizes Jesus. Everyone saw that.

When Jesus comes out of the water, the dove descends on him, and God speaks to him. *“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”* That is the Epiphany, this is God telling us who Jesus is, and the way the story is told, anyone who was there was able to hear it. THIS is my son, God is saying to everyone who is gathered around. That is God's word for all people. Unlike the star, which apparently was only meant for a few, this epiphany was for all people.

Now at the end of the service, we are going to do something that will have to do with star epiphanies, something that might help you find God's special word to you. *[At the end of the service we gave out stars to all the congregants. Each star had a word on it, which people were encouraged to*

meditate upon. The word might be an encouragement, or a thought provoker.] But now I want to talk about what God's epiphany for all people at the baptism means for us today.

And a part of what we do this Sunday is to reflect on our own baptisms. For many, if not most of you, that is not something you remember. Many of you were infants when you were baptized. But I ask you to reflect on what Baptism means in your life, and we can learn something about that based on what it meant for Jesus.

It is a sign that we also are children of God. In our baptism we learn who we are, and whose we are.

This is my Son—God tells Jesus who he is. You are my Son, and if you ever had any doubt of that, let that be banished. You are my son.

The boxer George Foreman has five sons, and all five are named George— George Jr., George III (“Monk”), George IV (“Big Wheel”), George V (“Red”), and George VI (“Little Joey”). When asked why he gave two reasons. The first was, in his words, “If you’re going to get hit as many times as I’ve been hit by Mohammad Ali, Joe Frazier, Ken Norton, Evander Holyfield – you’re not going to remember many names.” But the second is more important. “I want them to know where they came from.”

God says to Jesus, “You are my Son.” He wants Jesus to know where he came from, and prove that Jesus is a chip off the old block, he sends the Spirit in the form of a dove. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to the Pharisees that he knows where he came from and he knows where he is going. He came from God, and he is going to God.

In our baptism we are reminded that ultimately WE came from God. Remember last week's sermon? Before the foundations of the world, we were chosen by God. Like Jesus, we also came from God. We belong to God.

John Calvin said: “Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God. Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.”

In other words, Calvin is saying that if we want to know God, we need to know ourselves, and if we want to know ourselves, we need to get to know God. I understand God according to who I am. The circumstances of my particular life, and my particular understanding of life determines in part how I see God. But how I see God also helps determine how I understand the various circumstances of my life.

Here God tells Jesus, “You are my Son. You belong to me.” In our baptism, God says to us, “You are my child. You belong to me.”

How are you supposed to understand your life? You are a child of God. No matter what happens to you, you are one of God’s beloved children.

God says something else very interesting. “This is my Son, my beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” Now what is interesting about that is that Jesus has not done anything yet—well not anything of major import. He has not done any miracles, he has not healed anyone, he has not given any sermons yet, he has not even called his disciples. Nothing. Nada. His resume as Messiah, at this point in time, is empty.

And yet that is the point where he is told that his father is pleased with him—at the beginning of his ministry!

Jesus did not have to prove himself to God to win God’s favor. And if Jesus really was fully human as well as fully divine, he had every opportunity to back out. In fact, if you remember in the garden before his crucifixion he begs to be let off the hook. So when God says this, he really means that he loves Jesus, right then and there. At that point in time he is pleased with Jesus.

I said this last week, and it bears repeating; We cannot make God love us any more than God already loves us. God was pleased with Jesus, WELL pleased with Jesus, before Jesus ever gave his first sermon.

Now part of what we do this Sunday is to reflect on our own baptisms. For many, if not most of you, that is not something you remember. Many of you were infants when you were baptized. But I ask you to reflect on what Baptism means in your life. It is a sign of God’s love for you.

The reformer Martin Luther was prone to fits of deep depression. He already had a melancholy temperament, and after the reformation, when he realized he had almost single handedly split Christendom, the spells got worse and longer.

When it got really, really bad, when the depression got too much to handle, he would be seen in his room, often laying on the floor, and repeating to himself, “But I am baptized. But I am baptized.” For him that meant that no matter what happened in the world around him, he belonged to God, and was loved by God.

A few years ago one of my church members, I’ll call him Jack, but that is not really his name, visited my office, and during the visit asked if I would rebaptize him. Now in the Presbyterian Church, for

various reasons, we do not rebaptize people. We believe that one baptism is good enough. And we don't care who baptized you. Whether you were dunked by a backwoods Baptist, sprinkled by an Episcopalian, poured on by a Catholic priest, or had a dab of water put on your head by a Presbyterian, it is all God's work to us. Who and how does not matter.

So this presented a problem for me. Technically I am allowed to rebaptize him. I asked Jack why he wanted to be baptized again, and he told me that he first got baptized when he got married. His wife wanted to be married in her Episcopalian Church, and the priest refused to do the wedding if he was not baptized. So, for the sake of getting married in a church, because that was what his wife wanted, he agreed to be baptized.

"The priest told me what it all meant, but I did not believe a word of it," he said. "I did not believe in God, and I figured this was just a meaningless little thing to make the priest happy."

Well over the years, for a variety of reasons, Jack did start to believe. He had been worshiping with our congregation for three years, and had come to believe, first in God, then in Jesus as the Son of God.

I lied through my teeth the first time I was baptized," Jack said. "I want it to mean something, because now God means something to me."

I was not sure what to do at first. But as we talked, I began to realize something.

"Your baptism did not mean anything to you at the time," I said, "because God did not mean anything to you at the time. I understand that. But what you have to understand is that when God did not mean anything to you, you still meant something to God. You might not have believed in God, but God believed in you...and God still believes in you."

I told him the story of Jesus' baptism, and how Jesus hears those words before he has done anything of importance. I told him that baptism is an act of God, not of people. It does not really matter who does the baptism or how they do it. We believe that what is important is that God is involved in the sacrament. It is not just about getting our heads a little wet.

"Maybe God knew your future, and knew that you would one day be sitting my office, and that we would be talking about this. Maybe God knew that you would find your way back. Maybe God knew that meaningless ceremony you did way back when would one day become very important to you. Maybe not. Maybe God just took a gamble that it would all come together one day.

“But the important thing is that God was there when you were baptized. And God is still with you today.”

Jesus came up from the water, and the Holy Ghost descended upon him, and the Voice of God said, “This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

And God says that to us.