



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, January 13, 2019
The First Sunday After the Epiphany

Epiphany Procession
at 4:00 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate for Pastoral Care*
on
Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

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King and God and Sacrifice

Are you ready for another presidential election?

The candidates are getting ready and fast. There are 27 potential Democratic Party contenders at last count.

A few weeks back, Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren declared an exploratory committee for a campaign to run for president on the Democratic ticket in the 2020 election. She kicked off the beginnings of her official efforts with a trip to Iowa, the starting gate for many a presidential campaign.

The themes she discussed, limits on big banks and money in politics, expanded health benefits, unionization of workers - would likely be among the issues she'd pursue if she made it to the Oval Office. These speeches now, in the early days of the year before the election, are a preview of what to expect from a candidate. President Trump, when he announced his candidacy before the last election, spoke about challenging China economically, about the need to bring back American manufacturing jobs, and about immigration. These themes in his announcement speech should sound very familiar two years into his presidency.

But what do electoral speeches have to do with tonight's Epiphany procession?

Campaign speeches and promises are a sort of overture, like those before some older films and musicals, laying out the themes and motifs that a composer (or a candidate) will explore during what follows.

The three Gospel readings we heard tonight are the traditional stories of the great feast of Epiphany. The stories of the wise men, of Jesus's baptism in the Jordan, and of Jesus transforming water into wine. In these tales, we see the widening visibility and increased publicity of Jesus. Spreading first from a "local affair" among Bethlehem shepherds and hotel staff, to the Gentile world represented by the wise men from the East, then onto the public stage with the beginning of his ministry in his baptism in the Jordan River, then to his first miracle at the wedding at Cana.

These three stories announce Jesus to the wider world AND they foreshadow the rest of the Gospel story. Like a presidential candidacy speech or musical theatre overture, they present the themes that will define Jesus' ministry.

“Glorious now behold him arise: King and God and Sacrifice.” This is a line from the Epiphany carol “We Three Kings.” And it summarizes three of the many themes present in our narrative overture in tonight’s readings.

In our first Gospel story, the gifts the wise men bring to the baby Jesus and his parents are potent symbolic previews of the rest of the Gospel story, as the verses of “We Three Kings” lay out. The rich gold symbolizing the kingship of Jesus. The frankincense, to be burned in worship, symbolizing the divinity of Jesus. The myrrh foreshadowing the myrrh present in the stories of his crucifixion, symbolic of his sacrificial death.

King. Herod and the wise men heard about the birth of the “king of the Jews.” The feast of the Epiphany is, in large part, about the manifestation, the showing forth of Jesus to the wider Gentile world. And it is important that this showing forth is of the infant Jesus, in all of his vulnerability, humility, and humanity. Emphasizing the importance of Jesus as Emmanuel. God with us. Vulnerable, truly human, born of humble socio-economic origins. Here is Christ the King.

Sacrifice. In the story of Jesus’s baptism in the Jordan in St. John’s Gospel, John the Baptist announces that Jesus is “the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Revealing Jesus’ identity and previewing his mission as the one who gave himself for us in love, even to his death on the cross, to save us from sin and death. Harkening back to the Passover lamb whose blood on the doors of Hebrew homes saved them from death in the Exodus story. Baptism has been taken to symbolize death and resurrection, going down into the waters of death and rising up anew. Prefiguring here Christ’s own sacrificial death and rising again to new life.

God. The third story that we heard this evening, the changing of water into wine at the wedding at Cana - Jesus’s first public miracle - previews ALL of Jesus’ following acts of power: healing the sick, raising the dead, feeding the multitudes. These are “signs” as Saint John says, of Jesus’ identity, of his divinity. Completing the trio from the hymn, here we have Jesus as God.

In these Epiphany stories, the who and why of Jesus is foreshown. And this “campaign announcement” is not only news but truly good news because all of this speaks to who we are, who I am - in my doubts and my sins, my fears and my concerns, the who and the why and the how of my life. And the singular person, the compelling life, revealed in these stories is a life that sheds light upon my life. That challenges the shadows and the narrowness in my heart. That asks questions, vital, deep questions about how I am to live, who I am to be.

We are asked, by these stories rich in their meanings, to hold our lives up to the Gospel - not to beat ourselves up for falling short, because we will. But so that the symbols, the sacred themes of this great story might illuminate our own stories. Scattering the darkness of our lives and filling our hearts with holy light.

Because the divine campaign that is previewed here in the early stages of Jesus’ public life is deeply concerned with, as the Prayer Book says, “our selves, our souls and bodies.”

King and God and sacrifice. A humble infant king whom foreign dignitaries (representing the nations) kneel before. God in Christ transforming water into wine. The Lamb of God sacrificed for us going down into the waters that symbolize death and rising again. We are invited to contemplate and emulate this king, this God, this sacrifice. In our vulnerable human lives, amidst political and social questions and concerns, we are challenged to act according to our true King, Jesus. Which is to say to give of ourselves, to sacrifice in love. And in so doing to be transformed by grace, more and more, into the image and likeness of God.

As Saint Gregory Nazianzus, bishop of Constantinople, wrote “Nothing gives such pleasure to God as the conversion and salvation of human beings for whom his every word and every revelation exists.” “God, in

Jesus,” Saint Gregory writes, “wants to become a living force for all humanity that we too might become ‘lights shining in the world.’”

“Lights shining in the world.” Saint Gregory’s words sounded awfully familiar to me. They reminded me of a speech made during a political campaign which many of us heard or heard again very recently.

When accepting the Republican nomination to run for president in 1988, the late George Herbert Walker Bush compared America’s rich array of service and volunteer organizations to “a brilliant diversity spread...like stars, a thousand points of light in a broad and peaceful sky.”

Jesus’ campaign, previewed tonight, isn’t about votes but about souls and lives. He came down among us as a humble, vulnerable child, he went down in solidarity with us sinners into the waters of baptism and rose again, he worked his miraculous grace among those gathered at Cana and he works his grace among us today so that we might be saved and transformed. He gave himself for us in love and service and sacrifice. And we are to give ourselves to him and to one another in love and service and sacrifice, as well.

Glorious now, behold him arise: king, and God and sacrifice. And us: a thousand, thousand, thousand points of light.