



# ST. MARK'S ON THE CAMPUS

## Episcopal Church

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Sermon for the First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of our Lord

St. Mark's on the Campus

January 7, 2007

Our first reading from Isaiah raises some critical issues for the twenty-first century and the way we talk about God in it. Those issues take focus in the lines: “I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.”

These lines portray God as exchanging the well-being of one country for another, which isn't far from what we today hear claimed by some about God's preference for one country over another, or one religion over another, one *people* over another. Such ideas are abhorrent to many of us, and as is true about most abhorrent ideas, they can be supported by certain parts of scripture, if we read the Bible with an interpretive lens that propagates hatred rather than love.

Our religious tradition recognizes that early on God had a particular relationship with the Hebrew people, a relationship of covenant. That relationship involved mutual trust and commitment, mutual expectations and promises, mutual love and affection. And in the words of God to Abraham in Genesis, that relationship was intended to be “a blessing to all the nations of the earth.”

But throughout history, some people have taken what God chose to do at one point in history—enter into a particular relationship with a particular people—and claim it for themselves at *their* particular time in history: and not so that they can be a blessing to all the nations. Sometimes religious traditions have done so, sometimes our own *Christian* tradition, and at other times it *has* been the claim of a nation, whether it be those who are religious in the modern state of Israel, or our own United States, or Iran, or some other

nation that claims God is on *its* side rather than *some other* nation's side. When it comes to the interests of nations, rarely is God on the side of *all* of us. I'm not suggesting that God has no preferences about the way nations act in relation to one another. Certainly the scriptural witness is that God *does* have preferences about the way nations act, calling them to see to the interests of those who are most vulnerable in society: "widows and orphans" is the Biblical phrase, although in our own day we can all probably think of equally vulnerable groups of people, such as people dying with AIDS or the mentally ill.

And just as the scriptural witness portrays God as repeatedly calling on nations to see after the interests of the most vulnerable in society, so God also calls on nations to welcome the foreigner with holy hospitality, the hospitality that Abraham and Sarah exhibit to their three visitors and that the men of Sodom and Gomorrah fail at so miserably. As people of faith, we are called to let that witness inform our position on issues regarding immigration and the care of the stranger and the foreigner in our midst. Clearly God *does* have preferences about how nations and the governments that run them act.

And given the Biblical witness and the way that God is portrayed as *judging* as well as *supporting* Israel throughout its ancient history, it's a blasphemy to claim God's *blessing* upon our nation—*whatever* our nation might be—without also claiming God's *judgment* upon our nation. And unfortunately, that's something we rarely hear from elected leaders, whatever their party.

For whatever reasons—perhaps the sin that resides within us—we human beings don't tend to value that kind of humility in the leadership we elect to governmental leadership; we don't tend to value in our elected leaders the capacity to contemplate that we all are sometimes mistaken, even if we carry the best of intentions. I don't know that Americans are any guiltier of this than others, but certainly we are guilty of it. In recent history we have too often chosen leaders who are far more interested in proclaiming the righteousness of the American way rather than acknowledging any of our limitations. It's far easier to invoke the name of God when we believe that we are always right than it is to invoke God when we are confessing our wrongdoing. But of course the easy way is not always the holy

way. All of us learn that, one way or another. And it would be far more powerful to acknowledge God's love for us in the fullness of our humanity—where we are broken as well as where we are whole—than it is simply to invoke God's blessing upon what *we* believe to be right. The latter smacks too much of the locker room prayer before the big game in which the coach asks God to bless his team and help them win. Of course the stakes are far higher in games between nations; sometimes they are a matter of life and death. But no nation is perfect, and the whole world loses when any of us pretend that we are.

One of the profound reminders of baptism is that you and I belong to a group, to a people, that transcends *every* barrier among the human race, whether of nationality or religion or race or gender or sexual orientation. I know that sounds a bit like an ad from an Equal Opportunity Employer, but one of the things we do right as a nation—at least in theory, and that's a good beginning—is to recognize that *everyone* has equal rights in the sight of God and therefore should in our sight as well.

Maybe there's a paradox in the reality of belonging to a *group* that transcends divisions, and maybe that paradox is quite deliberate on God's part. Certainly the church over the centuries has had to struggle to be faithful in living out our witness to the grace we believe lives within us but that far transcends us because it emanates from God. At times we've forgotten the way that God's grace transcends us, and we've failed to identify sufficiently with the rest of humanity, as if the good news is only for ourselves and not for all of God's creation. We Christians are not exempt from wanting to separate ourselves from others because of behavior, because of differences of opinion, because of the multitude of reasons that exist for people to separate themselves one from another.

Jesus himself was asked repeatedly to separate himself from people. "We caught this woman sinning, breaking the law of Moses. Shall we stone her?" "You're not allowed to heal on the Sabbath, no matter how ill the man is." "Rise up on behalf of your people, O Jesus, rise up and conquer the Roman oppressors!"

And repeatedly Jesus chose to respond to such temptations by identifying with others and standing *with* them, reminding us that God stands *with us all*, hanging on all the crosses that we continue to make, the ways in which we separate ourselves from one another, one nation from another, one religion from another—and throughout it all, continue to separate ourselves from the way of God, who is united with all, not approving of our sin but redeeming it. That unity with all that exists is the identity you and I are given in baptism. We're *born* into citizenship in one country or another. But we are *granted* citizenship in the state that transcends all those divisions by the sheer grace of God. It's that grace that gives us our primary identity. And everything that causes us to confuse who we are by God's grace with some lesser identity comes from something other than grace, from some reality not made of the hands and the heart of God.

Not all divisions are equally sinful, but none of them are the kingdom of God incarnate either. Not Iran, not Israel, not the United States; not the Episcopal Church, nor the Anglican Church of Nigeria; not the Roman Catholic Church, nor the Reformed traditions, nor the Orthodox tradition; not Judaism, Islam or Christianity. Both the church and the world are most faithful to God's purposes when we *give up* trying to decide who has the truth and become primarily concerned with living out the reconciling ministry of Jesus into which we are baptized, the ministry into which God calls us, in the words of our baptismal covenant, "to seek and serve Christ in all persons . . . and to strive for justice and peace among *all* people, respecting the dignity of *every* human being."

The more deeply we live into that baptismal reality, the more deeply we live in a holier communion with all that exists, just as God does. We live as members not of separations created by human beings—whether of country or faith or of something else altogether—but as members of the human family for which Jesus came and died and rose again, to redeem us from sin and death, and to make us heirs in him of life eternal, of life that *pursues* life for *all*—with steadiness and with intention and with passion, and as one with the grace that pours into this life and makes it worth living.

We'll now stand and join in the renewal of our baptismal vows on p. 292.