

5th Sunday of Easter

Sermon 4.14.17

Scripture: John 10:1-14
1 Peter 2:1-10

Today, we will baptize Amos. We will do this that he might begin his life in Christ proclaimed, that he might be not simply a beloved child of God (which he already is) but that he might accept, and live in the intention of, being a beloved child of God, made in God's image and created for God's purpose.

That he is an infant amounts to very little in this awesome project, this awesome adventure that he's about to embark on. That he hasn't reached the age of reason, or even the age of verbal, amounts to very little. That this isn't his choice, his doing, his intention or proclamation (not yet anyway): none of this really matters. After all, even the most intelligent and conscious person can't really, truly understand what it means to be a child of God and a follower of Christ, baptized with water and the Spirit. None of us really understands what baptism is or what it does. We do it because Jesus, crucified and resurrected, told us to. But none of us really knows *why*.

Take Thomas, for example. Sure, the topic at hand wasn't baptism per se—it was following where Christ was leading, it was going to where Christ was going. But he couldn't get it. Thomas: he couldn't grasp the suggestion, the aim.

Not that I fault him for that. Thomas gets a lot of shame and blame. The one who doubted, the one who demanded of the Risen Christ what he needed in order to believe ("Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands..."), Thomas gets a lot of shame and blame for his so-called "doubting." But I've always pulled that punch in his regard. I'm not interested in putting him down.

First of all, everyone else had had the chance to see "the marks of the nails in his hands." All the others had had the chance because they were locked away in fear when Jesus came in visitation. But Thomas had been "out." He was the only *not* locked away in fear. He was the only one out doing who knows what, but I think we can assume it was in some service of all the others. Let's put it this way, he wasn't out for a stroll. He wasn't at the movies. It had been a terrible few days, and a terribly mystifying first day of the week. And now he was out—getting provisions, doing recon, checking on the wellbeing of friends or telling friends

about the wellbeing of the eleven. So, when he came back and they all told him: “We have seen the Lord!” *of course* Thomas wanted the same for himself.

Then there’s the fact that Jesus granted him what he wanted. I mean, while we’re busying shaming him, Jesus simply grants his what he needs: “Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands...and put my hand in his side...”

Third and most important is this: what he wanted to see, wanted to *do*. It’s important that Thomas didn’t simply want to see Jesus’ face, or see him up and walking around. He wanted to see Jesus’ wounds, his mortal wounds. It’s as if Thomas didn’t need confirmation about the *resurrection* of Jesus, but about the crucifixion. It’s as if Thomas didn’t proof as to the special relationship between Jesus and God, but proof that this beloved one of God would then also become the crucified one broken by the world. Really, if he can be said to have doubted anything, it’s this — that the beloved one becomes the crucified one.

But why wouldn’t he doubt this?

Why wouldn’t he question this?

We do. These days, particularly in certain manifestations of the church in America, there’s widespread denial of the crucifixion. There’s widespread assertion that good fortune, and not bad, is the sign of God’s blessing, that wealth and abundance are the manifestation of God’s favor — but that’s just capitalism with a cross for decoration, that’s just triumphalism pretending at piety and humility. In the ancient world, for the likes of Thomas, I imagine it was something else, something slightly less obnoxious.

For Thomas, though, and the likes of him, this skepticism that the beloved one became the crucified one cut against so many centuries of tradition, not to mention common sense. Because the way it should be is that the one who received God’s favor, God’s blessing, is mighty and conquering, becomes wealthy and powerful. That’s much scripture implies — the stories of the Patriarchs, the stories of the kings. Proverbs certainly imply that right living leads to God’s blessing leads to health and happiness, security and honor. Sure, the prophets often had a different take, but their frequently interpreting bad fortune as sign of God’s judgment against them implies its opposite, that good fortune is a sign of God’s approval.

So what are we to do? What are we to believe? Really, I think my not wanting to shame Thomas too badly stems from the fact that I can *relate* to him. So, he wanted to see

Jesus' wounds, and to put his hand in the marks of the nails and his hand in his gaping, he wanted to *see*. Well, this is what we're all to "Come and see."

This gospel, John's gospel, is the gospel of "Come and see." Jesus said it to those who'd first come to follow him. They then said it to those who would come next. Then a woman who simply met and talked with Jesus at the well in Samaria said it to her neighbors back in the village, "Come and see someone who knows everything I've ever done. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" Finally, Mary and Martha said it back to Jesus, such that the invitation had come full circle, suggesting that now Jesus' earthly ministry was complete, as if now he was to move on the next step—crucified, raised, and glorified by God. Come and see that God is self-giving love and that by this the world will be saved, will be completed and made whole, will be perfected. Self-giving love, the mightiest force there is because by this all other force comes to rest: "Come and see."

As it happens, this is both the way and the end—which, too bad for Thomas, he also didn't quite grasp. But maybe none of them had. Maybe Thomas was just the one who had the courage to ask. It does take courage, you know, to ask a clarifying question. It takes courage to be the one of a group to disclose your own misapprehension, your own ignorance. Maybe also the rest of the disciples knew this about Thomas—that they could count on him to be the one to raise his hand, the one to admit, "I don't quite understand." And then everyone could learn from his having asked for further teaching on any given matter.

This time, the given matter was Jesus speaking of where he'd be going next.

We're gathered with him now in the upper room, and it's the night of his arrest. Judas has just gone out to do "quickly" what he would do. And now Jesus would take these last few hours to preach lovingly, and to command love, and to pray to the Father that these friends would dwell secure, though in the world, yet also in the Father's love.

And this gets to what Thomas struggled to grasp, and what the others perhaps struggled to grasp. There's something funny spatially going on in Jesus' departure, something mystifying in his understanding and speaking of where he was going. "...I go to prepare a place for you," he told his disciples, "and I will come again and take you to myself...and you know the way to the place where I am going." There's something strange going on in this imagining or this conjuring, about this sense of place.

Thomas's question calls it out: "We don't know where you're going, so how can we know the way?" In this framing of the problem, he reveals a very worldly understanding of time and place. There's here and there's there, and to get from here to there you take a series of steps whose order depends upon your knowing where you're going. Only by that will you reach that place.

But Jesus is speaking of something otherworldly, something of a different quality of time and place, of timing and placement. Jesus is conjuring a realm where time is something other than linear, and circumstance is something other than a matter of cause and effect, and place is something other than externalities as determined by the laws of nature and the physical world.

Thus, for Thomas, in order to know *how* to get where Jesus is going, he first needs to know *where* Jesus is going. But for Jesus, the way to get to where Jesus is going *is* where Jesus is going. The way *is* the getting there. The way *is* the arrival. The means to that end of Jesus' journey to the father are the end itself.

And that way is Jesus. That way is the mode that he demonstrated throughout his life, throughout his ministry, and would most especially demonstrate the very next day following this gathering in the upper room. The way is Jesus and the mode he demonstrated—which is to say, the way is cruciform. The way is self-giving love.

Embark on that way and you will have arrived where Jesus is going. Embark on the way that is cruciform and you will have arrived in the dwelling place where Jesus would soon be going, the dwelling place where Jesus has, according to John's gospel most empathically, always yet dwelt. The abode where Jesus according to John is staying is the abiding of Jesus in God and God in Jesus, the mutual indwelling of these two whose love for the other is so profound that it cannot train itself only on the other and cannot contain itself in this mutual out-pouring but simply must find others to participate in the love. Thus, we are called into that mutual love. We are all members of that abounding household. We are all invited into this abode, and not as strangers or as guests but each of us like a child at home.

This is the abiding amongst which Amos will, moments from now, be brought in. Though he hasn't chosen so for himself, and though he couldn't articulate anything even approaching this, he already knows quite a lot about dwelling in another in such a way that gives birth to being. As I said a couple weeks ago, watch him watch the faces of the people

whose being have given him being. His gaze is as if his life depends upon it. The source of himself is so compelling, so beautiful. Really, though he hasn't chosen baptism for himself, he already knows this way—knows it so surely that we might humbly from him learn. Yes, while it's true that we will guide Amos in the way of Christ, which we'll soon promise, it's also true that he might guide us. For who knows better than him that yearning for true sustenance spoken of in the 1st Letter of Peter?

This is the lectionary reading, by the way—Easter 5, Year A. I didn't choose it for this morning, and neither did Adam and Hannah choose this morning (Easter 5, Year A) in order to have this image evoked when they brought Amos for baptism. Let's take it, then, as a gift of grace that with these words yet hanging in the air, Amos will become as much a disciple as any others of us—someone who will learn of the cruciform and saving way of Christ, and someone who will guide in this gracious way that others might learn, might decide for themselves to follow.

Amos knows yearning. He knows faithful seeking out the face of his source. He knows trust in the love that sustains him. In short, he knows what to want. He knows rightly what to desire. How many of us can say this of ourselves?

Let us learn from him, then; and let us teach. Most of all, let us rejoice that we have a new brother to journey with in the way of salvation and peace, love and true life.

Thanks be to God.