

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Epiphany

Sermon 1.10.16

Scripture: Acts 8:14-17  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I saw cows running once. It was on a Christmas morning—five years ago now, I'd guess. I can't quite remember because the event doesn't take up residence with other memories in my mind. It's been relegated to the conjured, the dreamt up. I remember those running cows like I remember a dream.

There's no way they could have been real. But they were real, I tell you, even though there's no way they could have been, or at least there's no accounting for how or why they were there.

I was walking the dogs.

This was in our old dog-walking terrain, the Meditation Meadow that's kept by St. Helena's Church, an Episcopal chapel across and down the street from my house. We used to walk there, my dogs and I—hemmed in by a hedgerow that blinds the meadow of the backyards of its many neighbors, and featuring several stops, where a bench and a plaque displaying a passage worthy of meditating on invite the pilgrim to sit and think.

We never did sit and think, though, my dogs and I. I walked and thought, and the dogs ran madly from one curiosity to another, often out of my sight and so likely on someone's back lawn—all until we were politely asked by the faithful keepers of the meadow to find some other ground for soiling and running wild.

I get it. I took no offense. But, really, mine weren't the only animals to run wild in the Meditation Meadow. That Christmas morning there was that herd of cows.

But we have no cows in my neighborhood. Circumscribed by East Street, Holmes Road, Williams Street, East New Lenox Road, and New Lenox Road, this green, and wooded, and meadowed, and mown few square miles of space is home to no cows that I can think of. We have a horse farm. We have flocks of sheep and goats, which are guarded by llamas. We have bikers, runners. There's a young woman who walks up and down the street in the summer time, singing full-throated along with whatever's on her iPod, and an older woman who picks up litter and wags her finger at drivers operating their vehicles at entirely too high a speed. We have a few German Shepherds, two Jack Russell terriers, a black lab, a Yorkie, a beagle, and quite a collection of mutts. James Taylor lives up the mountain a bit,

and drives up and down our road in his blue Toyota. There are deer, turkeys, foxes, coyotes and (in season) those who hunt them. We've got bears, rabbits, snakes, crows, but no cows.

Yet, on that morning, that Christmas morning, snowless and mild as it was—gentle and brown as it was, come to think of it, not unlike a cow—as we were all finishing up the walk, the dogs and I, having rounded the meditation circle two or three times, the dogs sniffed the air and turned.

They saw the running herd before I did—about as far from us as I am from the outside front step of the church. I only noticed them, the dogs—terriers whose first instinct is always to bark and leap after what they see moving. But they just as quickly leapt back, and, still barking, held a stance of alarm and alert.

At this, I turned and there they went, six or so cows, running so closely together that their bodies might have touched. They were not running from anything that I could see. They were not running toward anything that I could think of. Halfway across the meadow by the time I noticed them, they didn't notice me, and took no notice even of the barking dogs. They just ran, each keeping pace with the others, as fast as horses trotting. I watched as they made their way, soundless, through the thicket that demarks the meadow from the railroad tracks.

Then they were gone.

When I'd returned home to my holiday houseful, I said nothing (though I did tell the boys later on). I just pondered these things in my heart.

That said, I really hate that I've become bored with the baptism of Jesus, but I have.

We hear of it every year at this time. On the first Sunday of the season of Epiphany, we hear of this event—every year because it's in all three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke; so whichever gospel we're following for the year (this year it's Luke), the baptism of Jesus there on offer. (Incidentally, we hear of it also on the second Sunday of Advent, though then with the focus on the person of John the Baptizer.)

But it's not only that it's there, in all three synoptic and also (it should be said) in John (whose gospel isn't considered "synoptic" because it's less a synopsis of the life and more a theological exploration of *who* he was and what response that should call forth in us). No, it's not only that the baptism is there, in all four gospel narratives. It's moreover that from there, the story of Jesus really begins. It's the baptism of Jesus that is the inaugural event in the ministry of Jesus. It is the rite that makes public his call, his vocation; and it's perhaps even

the rite that makes it all possible. This seems to be the case according to Mark, given that his gospel begins, chapter one, verse one, with John introduced to baptize Jesus, which implies that, by this rite, Jesus is begotten as the Christ.

Luke, of course, considers Jesus' conception as his beginning and his begetting. That Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit when this power of the Most High came upon the Virgin Mary—it's for this that Jesus would be considered the Son of God, the Savior who is Christ the Lord.

Nevertheless, according to Luke, the baptism is, doubtless, an important event.

A few details worthy of notice: the baptism that John offered was one of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Jesus received such a baptism. Yet one central claim we often make about Jesus is that he was essentially *not* in need of such things. He didn't need to repent; he didn't need forgiveness.

Remember, that to repent is to turn, to change. *Metanoia* is the Greek term, which implies a change of mind, and change of knowing. I've said in that past the *metanoia* is setting one's mind on the mind of God. But Jesus, as I know him at least, is someone who already abides in God and so for whom *metanoia*, repentance, is already a done deal.

So such a baptism of repentance: wouldn't this be redundant?

Likewise the forgiveness part. We often confess Jesus as without sin, but this calls into question what sin is. The easy answer is, personal moral failings. Sin is personal moral failings, which means, if Jesus is sinless, then must Jesus embodied perfect moral rectitude. But I honestly don't know how anyone could pull this off, not while living in the social world. Think about it: relating with other people, especially close relating, is a constant exercise in moral uncertainty. What's the right thing to do when two people have conflicting needs of you? What's the right thing to say when one person has told you something that impinges on another person, or perhaps a whole group, but is not yours to share or act on? Think about this too: sometimes perfect moral rectitude plays out as stiff, even proud, piety that ends up offending more than it honors.

But all of this is moot, at least according to me, because I don't think sin is a matter of personal moral failings. I think sin is more social and structural, not to mention historical and binding, as all that. I don't think sin is a matter of choosing wrong when given a choice between right and wrong. I think sin is a matter of not fully having a choice because of what

we've inherited as history that is yet determinative, and where we're located socially that we didn't choose and yet from which we make the choices that largely make up our lives.

So, this is the point of Jesus' proclaimed as being born of virgin—not that it means it involved no sex but that it means it involves a radical break from history as an inheritance of clinging, pervasive sin. (Paul wrote of sin that clings so closely. John Calvin understood sin as pervasive, by which he didn't mean that it's the all in all, but that it is pervasive to the degree that we're never entirely free of it—but by grace.) But Jesus wasn't born into such tragic entanglements. Instead, he broke into them that we might conceive of such a radical, and gracious, break from all that.

So maybe this is the meaning of Jesus receiving a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin—not that baptism effects such things (repentance, forgiveness), not that baptism is the means by which such things are realized and established, but that baptism is the revelation of such realities that are already present, already perfected. Forgiveness yet reigns, and *for* this, *because* of this: John's baptism was a recognition of this also pervading truth. Or at least that's what Jesus receiving such a baptism transformed John's baptism to mean.

I wonder if this is what Luke meant to underscore in his telling of the baptism as an event already complete.

The other gospel writers narrate the baptism in real time. We see Jesus come out to the river Jordan, we see him wade into the water, and we hear John object—that he should be baptized by Jesus and not the other way around. We hear Jesus then insist (“Let it be so for now.”) and see him submerged into the water, and then emerge from it.

But in Luke's telling, the baptism is already complete: “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized...” This is the past perfect tense, and perhaps it's meant to call out the already complete; perhaps it's meant to recognize an already perfected reality. John's promise for repentance and forgiveness is already fulfilled and perfected. Therefore such a baptism as John offered will no longer be relevant. Now, there will be another sort, which he foretold, a baptism in the Holy Spirit—this which Peter and John offered the Samaritans (the *Samaritans*, of all people!) and this which those of us who've been baptized have also be given.

And as to what *that* is, that's a sermon for another time.

Meanwhile, it's worth saying that we're going to hear a lot about the Holy Spirit this year. Luke witnesses to the reality and presence of the Holy Spirit more than any other gospel writer, nearly twice as often. Fifty-three times Luke recognizes the centrality of the Holy Spirit to the events of his telling, and that's in his gospel narrative alone. In his 2<sup>nd</sup> book, the book of Acts, he wrote of the Holy Spirit 113 times.

The frequency of this should invite us into a state of wonder and surprise. Luke's frequent mention of the Holy Spirit was likely meant to keep his readers open to the mysterious, the mystifying. The Holy Spirit rarely performs the predictable—or perhaps not *only* performs the predictable. The Holy Spirit also disrupts, challenges; the Holy Spirit pushes out, broadens, expands.

And I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, what's with the cows? The answer is, I don't know. The answer is that those cows are stubborn in their defiance against any sensible explanation whatsoever. I don't know whence they'd come. I don't know where they were going. I don't know why they were there—to the degree that I don't even know *that* they were there. I cannot make sense of them.

So why bring them up?

Skipping cows come up in the psalm that we used as our Call to Worship in a line I've read a million times and never attended to once—until today. I just didn't believe the image as real, to say nothing of true. That Lebanon is like a skipping cow—I don't know a country or a tract of land might be helpfully understood thus.

Then there's this, that Patty made a point of choosing a hymn that calls on this image to help us witness to God at work in our lives (though the hymn's line is from the prophecy of Micah, not the psalm). In her pointing that out to me, that she had chosen this hymn, I remembered those cows, those running cows, that can't have been real because there's no accounting for them there that day, and yet that were real.

The baptism of Jesus is the last thing that should bore me, should bore us. What it revealed, what it even ushered in to be spoken forth—the voice of God heard to have spoken, no less: the *voice of God!*—is the last thing that should call forth in us, “Ho hum.” What this event should actually have us thinking in response is, “Wait, what? Say that again.”

“Did I see what I think I just saw?”

“Did I hear what I think I just heard?”

Did that really happen?

This is the challenge that the life of faith presents the faithful. We come here every week, some of us; or we come as often as we're in town and otherwise we might go to some other place like this. We come here and we listen to stories every week, stories that we'll hear again this week next year, or this week three years from now. And these will become familiar, so familiar. They'll become a part of us such that we can call them forth when we need them, when life presents us with something that only these stories—perhaps even these words, these phrases—can give us context for deeper understanding, deeper wisdom, deeper and higher hope.

But in becoming familiar they might also lose their power. They might become boring or predictable, and this is profound loss—because the God to which they testify is a God both deeply faithful but also distressingly surprising. This is a God who comforts and who shocks, who reassures and who scandalizes, who rocks us to sleep and who comes to us then like a thief in the night, whispering, insisting, perhaps sometimes screaming, “Wake up!”

I've been thinking of wisdom as knowing what time it is. I think I've been thinking of it this way, in terms of time, because my kids ask me all the time what time it is. We have clocks in every room of the house, and the time is also kept on every phone in the house—the cordless and the cell—and every other device, of which we have a surprising number. And yet they ask me, several times a day every day, “Mom, what time is it?” And I often push back against this. I say, “Look for yourself.” But in my more patient moments, I suspect they're not asking me for the actual time, they're asking me for an interpretation of that time: is it time to do something specific? Is it time to get ready? Is it time to sit around? Is it time to practice the piano or build LEGO and watch TV?

I've been thinking of wisdom of the sort that God would have us repent so to be a part of as knowing what is the right response to God as present to us at any given moment. What time is it? Is it a time to be born, or a time to die? Is it a time to plant or a time to pluck? Is it a time to repose in faith or to act in hope? Is it a time to rest or to wake up already? In church, it's always a time for surprise. Yet it's also a time to regress in the assurance that God is here, God is love, and God redeems every random, disturbing, bizarre thing—fulfilling its purpose and making all to cohere.

So let's say it, as we always do: thanks be to God.

