

EPIPHANY I (First Sunday after Epiphany) Jan. 13., 2008, St. Paul's Cathedral
The Rev. Canon Dorothy Curry

Is. 42:1-9 Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3: 13-17

Life as a follower of Jesus is much like a snorkel in the ocean. If you are a beginner at snorkeling or you haven't done it for a while, you approach it cautiously. You choose a calm day, a gentle ocean and a shallow beach. You prepare by putting on your fins and mask, then paddle out thru the warm gentle water. The world you see is fantastic, so beautiful, so colorful: parrotfish, sergeant majors, puffers, surgeon fish, needle nose, sea anemones (look don't touch) and, if you are lucky a turtle as big as you are is peacefully munching on algae. It is such a beautiful world that God has made. Emboldened, you swim along the coral and lava seeing more and more. Out you go just a little further, then a little further and THEN you are suddenly caught in the ocean's current. You try to go back, but the waves catch you and you are suddenly not in control, being swept against the sharp lava. With all your strength and a prayer on your lips you manage to turn and paddle back to safety. Sitting once more in the shallow water you breathe in deeply, thanking God for what you have seen and for your safe return to land. Yes, following Jesus is a bit like that.

In the early days we are enchanted by Jesus' message of love. As we prepare to know Him more and more, we wrap ourselves in the many offerings here at the Cathedral, offerings that warm us and feed us. Many of us experience charming little gifts from God like an unexpected parking place opening up. We go in deeper and are swept away at times by sickness, by job loss, by the death of a loved one, by a myriad of happenings that we thought we might avoid since we now know ourselves children of God. (Don't some Christian leaders tell us just that? That nothing bad can happen to us if we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior?) This is the tough love of God for us. We learn that God doesn't take away the darkness, the pain the self inflicted bad choices. If we put our trust in God, however, God will be with us in the raging water, in our powerlessness, while continuing to show us the beauty of earth, of relationships, of belonging, of love.

This is the promise we will make this morning to Isabella and David as they are baptized, not that they will have smooth sailing or a gentle snorkel, but that as they are challenged they will know the presence of One who loves them. The prayer we say at the end of the baptism really says it all: We ask God to forgive their past sins, to give them inquiring and discerning hearts, so they can know when they are in the presence of evil and turn toward the good; we ask that they have strong wills so they can persevere against the darkness and move toward the light. We ask God to open them up to His Indwelling Spirit, so that they may know and love God, because none of this is possible without that. But the final part of the prayer takes us back to that wonderful beach and the sea animals: We ask God to give Isabella and David the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works. (So evident here in S.D. and so gorgeous under and on top of the ocean if we take time to see, to open our eyes and hearts to experience them.) What a great prayer; what a great challenge Christian discipleship is.

I don't know what Jesus was thinking when he went down into the powerful Jordan River that day near Jericho, in that hot and treeless desert north of the Dead Sea. It certainly wasn't a particularly pleasant spot, not like the lush baptismal area at the southern end of the Sea of Galilee where so many pilgrims come to this day to be baptized in their flowing white robes. No, it wasn't like that, but John was there and the people were there, asking for absolution from their sins as they prepared to receive their promised Messiah. Jesus joined them, drawn by God's indwelling Spirit and what a joyful surprise he got! "You are my beloved, in whom I am well pleased". What a fantastic moment! We can imagine how that felt by remembering the 1st time WE knew God loved us and was actually pleased with us..... And then comes that impossibly strong current, sweeping Him into the desert to be tempted and tested in a way he probably never knew was possible. Jesus' ministry begins: in his Jordan experience, with God's love, followed by his desert suffering. His ministry begins there in the water, embraces the desert and a cross, comes to its fullness in an empty tomb and continues on thru us, his followers.

Yes, being a follower of Jesus is kind of like snorkeling in the ocean : full of joy, full of real challenges and the unexpected, but what a glorious ride it is!!! Thanks be to God. Amen.