Sunday, January 13, 2002
FULFILLING RIGHTEOUSNESS
Matthew 3:13-17

There are people who search all over the world in exotic places and strange religious movements, trying to find the sacred or the holy; people who want to experience the presence and love of God. These same people frequently miss the Spirit of God where they live, in everyday ordinary events. Jesus said, “The Spirit of God is in the midst of you, within you and among you.” He also said, “Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am also.”

A few weeks ago, we celebrated Christmas, which reminds us each year that we can find God in the commonplace, in the ordinary. The shepherds found God in a baby in a manger. The Wise Men, who came searching for him, did not find the baby in Jerusalem, where they first looked, and where some readers of the prophet Isaiah thought they might find the Messiah. After all, Isaiah was sure that one day Jerusalem would again become a center of productivity and prosperity, a place of international trade. He imagined that nations would stream toward its gates. So naturally, a new king would be there.

Maybe the Wise Men had heard of Isaiah’s dream, and that’s why they first went to Jerusalem with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They thought they would certainly find the new king of peace and prosperity there. After all, Jerusalem was the location of the holy temple of God.

But as you remember from the story of the Wise Men in Matthew’s account, when King Herod heard of the Wise Men’s search, he was afraid. Even rumors of a new king are always a threat to the old king and the establishment. So he called his leading Old Testament scholars and said to them, “Tell me about Isaiah’s vision. What’s all this about camels, gold, frankincense, myrrh, and a new king being born?” The scholars told him, “You have the wrong text. And the Wise Men are using the wrong text too. Isaiah’s vision suggests that Jerusalem will prosper and have great urban wealth, but that’s not how it’s going to happen.”

Herod then asked, “What’s the alternative vision?” And the scholars told him about Micah’s prophecy (Micah 5:2-4): “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah ... from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old ...”

This is a voice of a different kind of hope for the future, a voice not impressed with high towers, large arenas, or centers of finance and urban achievement. Micah envisions a leader who will bring peace and well-being to his people, not through political ambition, power, and wealth, but through attentiveness to the practices that bring justice and compassion.

So the Wise Men left Jerusalem and found the baby in a house in Bethlehem. It reminds me of Elijah, who in the darkest time of his life was hiding in a cave, feeling abandoned by God. He discovered God not in the earthquake or the fire, but in a “still small voice,” or as some translators prefer, “in a deep silence.”

In today’s Bible story from Matthew’s gospel, we meet Jesus as an adult. Matthew tells us nothing about Jesus between his family’s return from Egypt and his encounter with John the Baptist. As an adult, Jesus asks John to baptize him. At first, John is reluctant, saying, “I need

to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answers, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

Then Matthew tells us, as do the other gospel writers, that when Jesus was baptized, "the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him, and a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'"

Nothing earth-shaking happened. Those who witnessed the event saw nothing out of the ordinary. Later, Jesus described it as the Spirit descending like a dove — a quiet, confident assurance that God was with him and that he was with God. That's the kind of assurance we all seek.

The Bible story here is not about some kind of magic that automatically makes everything right in an instant. The gift of God's Spirit, or God's grace, doesn't eliminate all our problems. It doesn't cure all diseases, solve all struggles, or make everything smooth and successful. Rather, God's grace is an amazing power that allows us to face life as it is, with its tragedies and unfairness, and still know deep within that life is good, that it is a blessing in God's creation.

The winds of God's grace are always blowing, but we have to raise the sail. How do we do that? Let's return to the story of the baptism of Jesus for the answer.

Two things happen in this story: the Spirit descends like a dove — quietly and unobtrusively — and Jesus experiences the assurance that God is with him. Most importantly, both of these things happen in the context of his baptism. John was initially reluctant to baptize Jesus, but he agreed when Jesus said, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness."

What did Jesus mean by this? I believe he meant that fulfilling righteousness begins with faithfully practicing the activities that nourish your spirit and deepen your faith. As you are faithful in these practices, your faith grows, and you become more open to the Spirit of God descending on you like a dove.

This is true in most areas of life. Sociologist Daniel F. Chambliss conducted a study, "The Mundanity of Excellence," in which he discovered that what separates Olympic swimmers from others is not just natural talent but their commitment to mundane, everyday practices that prepare them for competition. While natural talent plays a role, excellence is often attributed to talent only because we overlook the years of careful practice and habit formation that lead to success.

Chambliss concluded, "Excellence is the doing of all those little things, each one done correctly, time and time again, until it becomes a firmly ingrained habit."

This applies not only to athletes but to musicians, artists, and scholars. The greats like Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and Isaac Stern achieved excellence through countless hours of practicing the basics. Yet teaching beginners the importance of these mundane practices can be challenging. Many want to skip to the exciting parts, unaware that the road to greatness is paved with repetitive, disciplined work.

In the religious life, we can fall into a similar trap. We often focus on dramatic conversions, powerful spiritual encounters, or peak experiences. But the daily, mundane practices of faith — prayer, service, worship, and love — are what truly shape us over time.

Author Kathleen Norris once wrote, “In the life of faith, as in our most intimate relationships, our task is to transform the high romance of conversion into daily commitment ... to love God and each other in stable relationships that, like any good marriage, remain open to surprises and receptive to grace.”

Jesus knew that his, and our, receptivity to grace is shaped by our commitment to the mundane. This is how we “fulfill all righteousness.” In the Lord’s Prayer, we are taught to pray for our “daily bread,” not a grand banquet. Jesus taught us not to worry about tomorrow but to trust God in the ordinary moments of today.

The Christian life, in contrast to the feverish activity and consumerism of popular culture, calls us to faithfulness in work, worship, rest, and caring for others. These are the mundane practices that lead to a deeper experience of God.

Although we are baptized only once, we need to continually remember and renew our baptismal vows. These vows remind us that there is an alternative way of living in the world, a way that is grounded in faithful, everyday practices. When we do this, we experience, like Jesus did, God’s assurance: “You are my child, created in my image. I want the best for you and for all people.”

There are so many people who need to hear that assurance from God. I meet people all the time who feel like their lives are out of control, as if they’re in a car speeding down a hill with no brakes and no way to steer.

To all who feel lost or broken, to everyone who has lost touch with God’s good intentions for the future, the gift of God’s grace is waiting. It’s a gift of forgiveness, power, and hope, and you will often experience it in the mundane activities of faithful, day-to-day living.

One final caution: don’t expect everything to happen all at once. The grace of God may come to you in fragments — a nudge of power here, a ray of hope there. It may touch one area of your life at a time. The way is not always smooth. But the good news is that God is traveling with you. Amen.