

One year ago this Sunday, I was working at a church in downtown Toronto. It was a cold, blustery day in January and it was the first Sunday of Epiphany, the day, as it is this morning, that we remembered the baptism of Jesus.

Our church had the custom of sprinkling water over the heads of people to remind them of their baptism. The priest would walk around the people with a reed that he would dip in water and then fling upwards. The beauty of this was like a light rain. People stood. We all sang a lovely song. And it was all very moving.

Well this particular Sunday we had a visiting priest who was a Native American. He was old and had one of the most stoic faces that I had ever seen. He was difficult to talk to and I don't think he liked me very much. The reason why I don't think he liked me was that every time I tried to strike up a conversation with him, he would just walk away. Maybe he didn't hear me? I don't know. But it seemed odd that in one year of working with him, he never responded.

And it's a horrible feeling when you know that everyone else heard you ask a question. They just look away as if to make the awkwardness more bearable for you.

Well, this was the priest who was tasked with flinging this water above people's heads.

The service started and the music began to play. People sang. It was lovely. And then this priest began to make his way to the congregation. He picked up the reed and began to dip it into the water. And on the very front row there

stood a man singing who was new to the church. I had never seen him before, but it seemed as though he was enjoying the service - so I was happy to see him. However, my happiness was soon turned to shock as I watched what happened next.

The old priest dipped the reed into the water and did not fling the water upwards as he was supposed to do. Rather, he dipped it and flung it directly into this visitor's face. He was about one foot away. The man recoiled and wiped his face with his sleeve and looked completely shocked by what had happened. It was all I could do to keep from laughing.

And if that wasn't enough, when the old priest finished making the circle around the church he came to the front once again and I watched in amazement as he dipped the reed in the water and flung it once again directly in the man's face. The man recoiled again, wiping his wet face to reveal pure anger at the old priest, the church, and probably the whole of Christianity. I don't remember seeing the man at our church the next Sunday.

It must have been fascinating to the people of Israel to hear this man John the Baptist preach.

To see his rugged apparel. To hear his message of repentance and to witness his act of baptism.

People were coming by the hundreds to see him. And it must have been shocking for them to hear what he said on this day.

Some of the religious leaders of Israel had come out to hear John - to scrutinize him; to criticize him. But when John sees them he says, "You brood of vipers, don't think for a second that just because Abraham is your father you're safe, because you're not."

John paused for a moment and picked up a rock from the bank of the Jordan River and said, "Listen to me! From this rock that I hold in my hand God is able to make a child of Abraham! The axe is already laid at the root of the tree - God will cut it down unless it bears good fruit! He will cut it down and throw it into the fire!"

I imagine those people nearest to John white-faced and fearful, slowly inching away from this fiery man.

"Just because you are a child of Abraham you are not safe. God is able to make such a child from a rock."

Our hearts traffic in stories.

Stories we are told and stories we tell.

One author said, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live. Imposing stories upon the disparate images of our actual experience."

Thoughts. Feelings. Images. Points. These are all strung together by a story we tell. It's how we make sense of our lives. And I think it's how we find ourselves connected to something beyond even ourself.

Our hearts traffic in stories.

The people of Israel had been told a story for so many years - thousands of years in fact. They were children of Abraham. They were different. They were special. And as this story was told over and over again by fathers and mothers, stories told by kings and warriors the story began to be told in ways that it was never meant to be told.

Abraham was their father, but there's an important element in that story that seemed at times to be forgotten. The story comes to us from Genesis when God tells Abraham the story. He said, "You are blessed. I have chosen you. And through you all nations will be blessed. Everyone who breathes air; everyone who laughs; everyone who cries - They will all be blessed through you."

So throughout their history, prophets would come to retell the story of Israel. To remind them of their calling.

And we heard such a story today in Isaiah. The prophet says, "I am the Lord,

I have called you in righteousness,

I have taken you by the hand and kept you;

I have given you as a covenant to the people,

a light to the nations,

to open the eyes of the blind,

to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

It's a story that is at the heart of the Gospel of God. And it's a story that would be brought to fulfillment today on the banks of the Jordan River.

John is standing red-faced holding a rock in his hand looking at Israel's religious leaders. They are angry. The people standing near John are scared. "God is able to make even from this rock a child of Abraham!" he said.

The people are silent.

But something then begins to happen. People are moving to make way for a person walking towards John. It breaks the tension of the moment. John looks and sees Jesus standing near him.

They walk down into the Jordan River together. And John baptizes Jesus. The heavens are opened. The voice of God is heard. And the Spirit of God descends like a dove.

And we hear once again Isaiah's story:

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations He will not be crushed until he has established justice in the earth."

I imagine this moment for the people standing on the bank of the Jordan River to be like a moment when water is flung into the face. Shocking. The words of John. The baptism of Jesus. Shocking.

On this Sunday we stand together as we do every Sunday and we hear a story. A story told about God. A story told about the people of God. A story into which we are called to live. A story that calls us to be a light to all people. A story that calls us to open the eyes of the blind. To bring out prisoners from prison cells. A story that calls us to establish justice in the earth.

And it goes beyond mere belief - As John told the religious leaders, “God can make believers out of rocks!” What God desires is for people to enter into the Jordan River, into the waters of baptism and to be shocked by the voice that they hear. To be shocked by the Spirit which descends upon them. To be shocked to learn what is expected of them in Christ!

It is not enough for us to simply claim Christianity. It is not enough for us to simply say the Creed. When that is all we do we become as rocks. *Cold. Stolid. And Mute.*

But when we enter the waters of baptism with Christ we enter into *his* story. We enter into a story that tells us of power, but a power that is achieved only through weakness. A story that tells us of wealth, but a wealth that is only achieved through poverty. A story that tells us of the greatness of life, but greatness which is only achieved through death.

Our hearts traffic in stories.

Our story begins on the bank of the Jordan River.