

## “Evergreens in Winter”

4:00 AM, 01/14/17

9:00 AM, St. Ann's 01/15/17

Fr. Jim Plough

The Cherokee Indians tell the story that when the plants and trees were first made, the great Creator gave a gift to each species. But first he set up a contest to determine which gift would be most useful to whom.

“I want you to stay awake and keep watch over the earth for seven nights,” the Creator told them. The young plants and trees were so excited to be entrusted with such an important job that on the first night they found no difficulty in staying awake. However, by the second night, it was not so easy, and just before dawn, a few fell asleep. On the third night, the trees and plants whispered among themselves, trying to keep from nodding off, but it was too much work for some of them. By the fourth night, even more fell asleep.

By the time that the seventh night came, the only trees and plants still awake were the cedar, the pine, the spruce, the fir, the holly, and the laurel. “What wonderful endurance you have,” exclaimed the Creator. “You will be given the gift of remaining green forever. You will be the guardians of the forest. Even in the seemingly dead of winter, your brothers and sisters will find life protected in your branches.” Ever since then, all the other trees and plants lose their leaves and sleep all winter while the evergreens stay awake.

This creation tale talks about greenness in the midst of barrenness. It speaks to light in times of winter darkness. Is it not a beautiful metaphor about where we find ourselves in this time and place? Are we not called to be evergreens in the winter we are experiencing? While the world around us continues to move from the darkness of winter toward increasing amounts of daylight and the church transitions from the close of the Christmas season to enter upon Ordinary Time, we move from the celebration of the revelation of who the Christ-child is – his Epiphany to a few privileged to know him then -- to the beginning of Christ's ministry on earth. This takes us to today's gospel's account.

John the Baptist sees Jesus coming to him to be baptized with everyone else, and he says “I did not know him.” I did not recognize that he was not like the rest, coming in penitence for their sins. Then John says “I saw the Spirit come down

like a dove from heaven and remain upon him. I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God.” “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” We have been so instructed in this revelation of who Christ is to the whole world that we repeat in every Eucharist celebrating his public ministry: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1: 29-34).”

Isaiah prefaces all this today by saying “You are my servant, through whom I show my glory.” “I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth ( Isaiah 49: 3, 5-6).” Though spoken of the nation Israel, take heart, this testimony today is addressed to you. You are the evergreens in winter, to be light in a world of darkness. Our psalm refrain chimes in beautifully: “Here I am, Lord, I come to do your will.”

To find God’s presence in our world today, look inward, reflect upon how we live our lives and how we love one another. How do we drive out darkness? Through prayer, our eyes open to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, open to the dove that sat on Jesus’ shoulder and revealed to John the one he said he did know.

So our journey through Ordinary Time begins. Like the journey of John the Baptist, we experience a developmental faith journey, a journey where we may be faced with times when we cry out “I don’t see him,” and other times when we can feel the light of Christ shining upon us. But we take comfort knowing that, as we heard in today’s gospel, it is the Christ who comes to us no matter where we are in our lives. It is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who gives us the gift of sight. And it is our good and gracious God who calls upon us to be a beacon of light in times of darkness, an evergreen in barren land, a light to shine on others, as well as a reflection of Christ to ourselves.

Tomorrow we celebrate the life of Martin Luther King, Jr., who spent a lifetime bringing light into the darkness of racial segregation and discrimination. While sitting in a jail cell in 1963, he wrote, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.”

Martin Luther King was an evergreen in the darkness of winter. Can you become an evergreen too?

[ I am indebted to Deacon Jim Knipper for the substance of my homily. ]