Proper 21 B: Baptism of Owen Hector Medina

September 30, 2018

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 There are some days when preachers wish they could stay in bed and not be faced with the appointed lessons of the day; for me, this is one of them. At first glance, it would seem that the lesson from the Book of Esther and the passage from the Gospel of Mark are filled only with murder and mayhem and maiming! They do not seem to provide for us any ground for the Gospel message of love, joy, and hope. True, the passage on the power of prayer, appointed for us from the Letter of James, is a bit more comforting, but even there, we sense a bit of rancor directed at the listener. But today there *is* Good News! Today we will administer the Sacrament of Holy Baptism to Owen Hector Medina and welcome him into the fellowship of the Church, the followers of Jesus Christ.

 So I’m tempted to ditch the readings from Holy Scripture, grim as they might seem this morning, and focus only on Baptism. But that would just be dodging the issues, and we must always mine the Scriptures for what we can learn from them; for what they have meant to the generation for whom they were first written, what they may mean to us today, and what they have meant to all those generations in between who have found them useful as a guide to understanding the relationship between God and the people of God, and the miraculous gift of Grace which is ours in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

 The Book of Esther almost didn’t make it into the Canon of Holy Scripture – and do you know why? Because it never once mentions God! But what it does do, is tell us a story of how God was at work behind the scenes, saving the Jewish people through a most unlikely source for the time: a woman. The story takes place nearly 500 years before the birth of Jesus Christ, after the Jews of Jerusalem had been taken into exile in Babylon (present-day Iraq). There they spent almost 50 years living under the dominant pagan culture, forbidden to practice their religion publicly, yet worshiping in a sort of religious “underground,” much as Christians in Russia did under Communism during the past century. In the year 537 BC, Cyrus, King of Persia (present day Iran) conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Jewish people to return to their Jerusalem home. Some, however, had been so assimilated that they stayed, married into pagan families, and spread out in time over the Persian Empire, and that’s where the story of Esther takes place, in the Persian capital of Susa. While there is a great deal of confusion about the history and authorship of Esther, the story is an exciting one of palace drama, intrigue, villainy, racism, the threat of genocide, vanity, greed, and revenge. It is not a pretty tale. *But* it is also a story of salvation. The heroine, Queen Esther, saves the day for her own Jewish people by putting herself at risk – putting her life on the line, quite literally – to save the Jews from destruction at the hands of her husband, the pagan King Ahasuerus. Earlier in this account (Chap. 4), we hear Esther’s cousin Mordecai encourage her in this dangerous venture by saying to her, “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” In retrospect, in company with Jewish historians through the ages, we can see that God was working through Esther and Mordecai for the salvation of a people who might otherwise have been totally dispersed and destroyed, much as we see Syrian and Iraqi people today still being dispersed and destroyed by the ISIS regime. Esther’s Vocation was to save her people and create a future for them. Five hundred years later, Jesus would embrace that same Vocation – to be willing to be put to death, and rise again, to save the people of God from sin and death, and, by his astonishing resurrection, to create a future of hope and glory for all. Both the story of Esther and the story of the love of God in Jesus Christ show us God at work, overcoming evil with good, hate with love, and death with life. Hold onto that promise, for it is the Great Story of Scripture which is our story, too.

 In today’s Gospel passage, Jesus and his disciples continue on the way to Jerusalem and the cross. In past weeks, we have twice heard Jesus predicting his death and resurrection, and his disciples not understanding him. We have heard the disciples arguing over who would have the most important role in the emerging kingdom which Jesus has foretold. They don’t get it. They don’t get that the real enemy is the forces of evil, and that Jesus will overcome those forces, not by leading a government rebellion, but by submitting to a humiliating death on a cross for the salvation of all; to bring mercy and forgiveness, light in the darkness, and life everlasting to all. They don’t get it, but later they will, after he rises from the dead. Then they will at least begin to understand the mission of God’s Salvation and their own part in it. “Whoever is not against us is for us,” Jesus tells them. Put no stumbling blocks in the way of those who are new to the story, he says. Then he says some pretty wild things, seemingly about self-amputation and self-harm in general. Let me say that I do not, for one minute, believe that Jesus is speaking literally here, or that the evangelist Mark expected his listeners to hear and act on his words in a literal way. But I do think this is powerful metaphor, intending to teach his disciples that what we do with our hands, feet, and eyes – indeed, with our tongues and our very lives – can have serious consequences for us and for all those around us. One of my colleagues (Bill Doubleday) reminds us that we can harm others by our thoughts, words and deeds, and the choices and decisions we make matter to the world around us. These are words that get our attention! Hands can sign letters and e-mails that can cause permanent harm; they can take up arms in wars better left unfought; they can block hospitality and welcome for those different from us. Or they can be a source of welcome, nurture, kindness, hard work, eloquent writing and peace-making. Just so with feet and voice; you get the idea. The better part is to use our whole bodies to glorify the Lord by following in the way that Jesus leads. It won’t always be easy, but it will bring joy, peace, and hope to us and to those around us, and the light of hope in times of darkness and despair.

 And so today, Owen, we welcome you into the family of Christ; into following the path where Jesus leads. Today you will die to sin with Christ in the waters of Baptism and rise again to new and everlasting life. Through your parents and Godparents and all of us, you will make promises to renounce the evil powers of this world that seek to destroy our faith. In spiritual terms, that represents all those difficult and dangerous opportunities that the world and its temptations can offer us; when we embrace them, they darken, for a time, the light of God’s love in our hearts. In spiritual terms, we call that “sin.” But God is never absent and, in Christ, will hold you and make you strong to do good, that light and love may triumph over demons like racism, exclusion, division, and despair. Remember this, Owen, as you grow up into a world which may sometimes seem fearful and foreboding. Remember it when (not if) you fall into sin. Remember that you have been saved for all eternity by the love of God in Christ Jesus, who is always present in you to rekindle in you his Light, which you receive today. Remember that today you are born, for the second time in a little over four months, into a new – and this time, cosmic – family, a whole communion of angels and archangels, saints and sinners. Remember that through your Baptism you have the power to reflect the light of the Son of God to a sometimes-darkened world by practicing the generosity of Jesus; the courage, compassion, and forgiveness of Christ. Remember that on this day, you are marked as Christ’s own forever, and nothing and no one can take that security from you. Remember that your Vocation is to bring the Good News of God’s saving love to a world which so desperately needs to hear it.

Who knows, Owen - perhaps you have come to Baptism today for just such a time as this.