

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 16, Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

August 24th, 2008

***Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California***

The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

A Messiah for Characters

On the occasion of the baptism of Tiana Wimmer and Alice Wimmer Leiden

Over dinner recently, someone mentioned to me that we tend to collect a lot of characters at Church of Our Saviour. I had to grin and agree. Of course I had to note that the same is true for the Church everywhere I've been, and I'm one of those characters. How about you?

In conversation with Tiana, our adult baptismal candidate today, we wrestled some with the language of the baptismal covenant. It uses metaphors and phrases that have been unfortunately, at times, co-opted by a social and political agenda as well as a kind of Christianity most of us find uncomfortable and sometimes downright offensive. The "Jesus myth" popularized in our age sometimes feels like one of an angry, obsessive superhero...a vigilante ready to condemn those who do not follow him into battle with all who are judged aberrant or evil.

That's a caricature, of course. I have friends much more theologically conservative than I who would shirk from this pop-culture notion of Christ - one that I should add is now seeming to melt and evolve again into something else - I'm not sure quite what.

But the notion of the superhero Jesus, able to leap over the steeple of the church in a single bound, take away our pain if only our faith in him is good enough, turn our country into a peaceful yet powerful force for all that we hold good and dear...Well, it still has its moments of fascination for me. How about for you?

As does the alarming apocalyptic notion that, as I once heard an evangelical preacher put it, "Jesus will be the only safe place to stand when the fire of God's wrath comes unexpectedly." Behind the shock of that assertion, as compelling as it might be, is a theology built on fear. And I have to wonder how is this theology any different from the fear that we see peddled around the world to divide, coerce, or even oppress?

Of course, it's precisely that fearful notion of Jesus as the Messiah that has Christianity in derision for many of our neighbors of other faiths or no faith at all, especially here in Mill Valley and in Marin County. Perhaps it should.

So, from the outside looking in, then, it seems Tiana and Alice are engaged today in a bit of a countercultural journey - one not always all that comfortable - and one both excited by and rooted in the mystery that begins to unfold in today's Gospel - a mystery fundamentally rooted in this question for us as Christians: Just who is Jesus?

And it matters not so much who Jesus says of himself. Any two-bit can proclaim himself the Savior of the World, right? No, it matters who we say he is, every bit as much as it mattered what his first disciples said of him on a dusty first-century road between the pressing crowds and the astonishing things happening around this seemingly ordinary guy from Nazareth.

In fact, this is precisely why Jesus poses the question: It doesn't matter what he says. It matters what *we* say.

If we think Peter "gets it," today we should know him better by now, because, as we will learn next week, he doesn't. Jesus warns his followers to keep Peter's revelation quiet for reasons not all that far away from us today. The Messiah expected in the first century was a spiritual-political action hero of sorts, too. Throw the Roman bums out. Restore Ancient Israel to its glory under the reign of someone like King David, cleanse the religious tradition of every corruption and impurity. Able to leap the Temple Mount in a single bound.

With a public disclosure of the title "Messiah" Jesus risked being swept into the center of a violent grass-roots revolution or inviting a legion of Roman soldiers down on their heads...or maybe both. Elsewhere we are told he avoids being made king by the crowds and eschews violent confrontation whenever it begins to occur. Messiah for him and who he is means something different than it does for much of the world...and, in truth, Messiah means something different for Tiana, Alice, and all of us who are here this morning.

Our Messiah does not promise to save us from hardship, calamity, or even suffering. In fact, the Way of the Cross, the path of Christians through the ages has always been through those hardships, through those calamities, through that suffering. It has always been the path of the unexpected, unbidden, and strange, at least through the eyes of many in the greater world.

The Messiah into whose death and resurrection we are about to baptize Tiana and Alice teaches us through word and action that suffering is part of our transformation towards wholeness; that violence cannot save; that peace and compassion form the path we must take, even when the world shouts war; that new life comes from the experience of hardship and even death; and that God's way is to turn our worldviews upside down so that our weaknesses become strengths, the language of infants becomes wisdom, everyday tap water becomes holy, and the inexpensive homemade bread and cheap port on the altar becomes the most invaluable food that we eat.

Tiana, this is your last chance! I caution you for the last time that we Christians are slightly -- or maybe not so slightly -- crazy folk...a cast of characters across the ages, and of course in this place now...We count not on the powers of the world to save the essence of life, but we count on a God we cannot see. We count on a God who moves and lives deeper than all life, who is beyond the farthest flung star, and who remains closer to each of us than our breath!

The transformation we invite in baptism starts deep within our hearts and the Spirit that brings it about is so capricious, so unnervingly unpredictable, that we soon lose all hope of knowing where we might end up inside, and how we might, by grace, become catalysts for change in this mixed up world...

But we trust it will be good. Often good in ways we can't possibly imagine. And that we will find ourselves with unlikely friends and companions on the journey of this dusty road, experiencing the same thing and loving us through thick and thin, characters all... Baptism means we have a claim on this community that is immutable. Baptism means that... Oh, yeah!... God in Christ has a *claim on us* that touches eternity. It kind of means, or actually not so "kind of," that all other binding contracts and covenants will pass away before this one does.

But count on us characters who have been on this road for some time -- it's a journey for all of its surprises and odd twists and turns that is well worth it. One that began, we come to recognize, as Tiana has come to recognize, even before the water was invoked for us with the name that is no name, but greater than any other name. One that affirms and shapes the characters we are each becoming, the imperfect but beautiful reflections of life and being that mirrors the divine. A journey that transcends even death and puts all the hollow promises, suffering, and evil of this life back into perspective; helps move us through those places; and uncovers the compassion and love that birthed the universe and will see it through to the end and beyond.

So are you ready to join, in word and sacrament, this cast of characters?

You are warmly welcomed!