



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Epiphany 1 (A)

#### **Zombie Ants, Baptism, and the Beloved**

**[RCL]: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17**

In the 1950s, a young Harvard professor, Dr. Ed Wilson, discovered something fascinating about ants. When an ant dies, after a couple of days, the other ants take it to the colony's refuse pile where other dead ants and junk gets discarded. Ed Wilson discovered – after weeks of trial and error with a lab filled with the reeking odors of rotting dead things – that the smell that signaled an ant was dead was oleic acid. He ran an experiment in which he dabbed one of the living ants with the oleic acid, a substance not harmful to the ants in any way, and immediately a worker ant grabbed the living ant and hauled it off to the garbage pile. Only after a couple of hours of cleaning itself was the ant able to return from the garbage pile and resume life in the colony.

Subsequent experiments have shown that when ants are dabbed in the oleic acid, they will often self-isolate themselves to the garbage pile until the smell has been cleaned off or wears away. In other words, the living ants act like they're dead. One researcher affectionately calls these poor confused creatures "Zombie ants." A recent study of Argentine ants discovered that ants produce both "life chemicals" and the "death chemicals" their whole lives; however, when an ant dies, it stops emitting the life pheromones. With nothing covering the smell of the "death chemical" of oleic acid, the other ants then know to bury their dead comrade. While there are no literal ants in the readings for the day, there is a powerful lesson to be connected to today's Scripture.

Today's lectionary readings pick up on a strong interconnected theme that runs through the whole of the canon. The prophecy in Isaiah, the poetic verses from the psalm, the account of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles, and indeed even the Gospel of Matthew all pick up on the theme that God reaches out beyond every boundary to draw people into God's embrace. Today is the celebration of the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. The sacrament of baptism communicates God's presence and God's faithfulness. Baptism is simultaneously a sign of the love that flows from God's heart and reaches beyond all boundaries.

Isaiah 42, part of what scholars call deutero-Isaiah, contains the first of the "Servant songs" and speaks a word of hope—both present and eschatological. "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 that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in

darkness.” In this passage, the prophet writes to God’s people toward the end of the Babylonian exile. The people have strayed from God and been taken into exile, and now the prophet speaks a word of hope into this darkness of exile. Even in the midst of suffering, forcibly taken from their land, God declares God’s people beloved, chosen, and called by name.

“The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders; the Lord is upon the mighty waters.” This Psalm is a song about God’s presence in the storm. When the floodwaters rise, when the fires rage, when the earth quakes, God is still God. God is in the storm and sits “enthroned above the flood.” Floods, fires, and earthquakes are terrifying events. And yet, the Psalmist takes this fear and uses it to ascribe glory to God. Even amid all these events, God is present: “The Lord shall give strength to his people; the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace.” Even when terrifying events happen all around, God declares peace and blessings to God’s people. A line from Christian Wiman’s poem *Every Riven Thing* captures this sentiment: “Belonging, to every riven thing he’s [God’s] made, means a storm of peace.”

Moving to the New Testament text, Peter is preaching to the centurion Cornelius in the Acts of the Apostles. According to custom and law, Jewish people were not allowed to enter the houses of gentiles. But God sent a vision to Peter of unclean animals and said, “What God has cleansed, do not call unclean.” Now, Peter preaches to Cornelius’ household about the ministry of Jesus: “They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear.” This is restoration and renewal. This is radical inclusion. There is no human outside the reach of God’s love. Jesus died and rose again for all to be gathered unto God – not only the Jews but also those of every nation. Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled in Christ.

Even the great preacher John the Baptizer hesitates to step into the role that God has called him to. Matthew’s Gospel recounts, “John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” Perhaps the greatest preacher of his generation, John the Baptizer still hesitates, citing his own unworthiness when compared with Jesus. But Jesus answers him and instructs John to baptize him, “for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Truly, this is the right thing to do, for when Jesus comes out of the water the heavens split open and a voice from heaven declares, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

What do these themes mean for today? In the covenant of baptism, in that holy sacrament, God declares, “This is my Child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” God has given life anew, redemption, a path that is paved with love, renewal, belonging, and acceptance. God reaches to those that are lost, those that doubt their belonging, and those who doubt their worth and declares that they have a place in the Kingdom of God.

That’s the good news. That’s the best news. The problem is that many of us act like the zombie ants. We think we’re already dead. Like the exiles, like the excluded gentiles, and like John the Baptizer, we doubt our place in God’s kingdom. There are those voices all around us– the little voices, the loud voices,

external, and internal that all say in some way, “You’re not good enough. You’re faking it. You’re not worthy. You don’t belong.” And like the ants, we drag ourselves off to the graveyard with the dead ants, letting the glow of the light and life and love of God fade. To the Jewish exiles, there certainly must have been the voice, “You messed up. God is no longer on your side.” Even John the Baptist doubted his worth and ministry. John hesitated, telling Jesus he got it wrong, and that Jesus should be the one baptizing John.

And, like the ants that produce both the life chemicals and the death chemicals, those death voices are not going away. But the voice of God, the voice that thunders over the waters, the voice that breaks open the heavens, declares, “This is my Child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We just have to listen.

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