



## *Richmond Hill Reflections*

**“Embodying God’s Kin-dom”** (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

January 13, 2019; Baptism of Jesus Second (First Sunday after Epiphany)

Readings: Luke 3:15-22; Excerpt from Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

We’re embodied. Consider a phrase like “She’s comfortable in her skin”. It suggests self-aware-ness and confidence. “Stick your neck out” says you’re taking a risk. “Bury your head in the sand”? Not so much. We’re not just minds, but a blend of the mental, physical, spiritual. We’re influenced by our bodies more than we realize leaving some to question whether we even have free will. We can’t escape how much we’re defined by being bodies. Bodies that dream, think, feel, create. Bodies reaching beyond ourselves in pursuit of spirituality, but bodies just the same.

It’s our embodiment that gives meaning to the idea of sacramentality I shared last week, the idea that not only do we have rituals, visible things to signify invisible grace, but that every physical experience is a potential channel of the divine. This is what Annie Dillard alludes to as she writes about the creek that provided her with much insight: “So many things have been shown to me on these banks,” she writes, “so much light has illumined me... that I can hardly believe that this grace never flags.” She is clearly not only speaking of light reflecting on the water but something deeper. Her words are spiritual and yet not disembodied. This is what Incarnation means: the encounter we have with the holy, the one we call G-d, doesn’t happen despite our experience of being in the flesh but rather our bodies are the primary means by which we’re shaped spiritually.

This was John’s genius as he invited people to the river. He challenged them to *metanoia*. What we generally read translated as repent is actually to change your mind, take on a new perspective. Now the perspective John had in mind wasn’t really new. He wasn’t inviting them to any river. It was the River Jordan, the river their ancestors crossed when they entered their new home. In the wilderness of Sinai they left behind the physical and spiritual experience of slavery. Crossing the Jordan, reminiscent of crossing the sea when they first fled captivity, was rebirth for them. They washed away the remnants of bondage and emerged free. Trapped by empire again, the same imperial machine that would condemn John to prison and to death, he invited the people to the water to reclaim the call to let go slavery’s divisions and care for each other as kin.

The physicality of that experience was important. And particularly for Jesus. As Luke says, not only did he have a mystical experience of heaven opening and G-d claiming him as beloved child but Spirit descended in bodily form as a dove. Luke’s the only gospel writer to suggest that and no one is sure why. One possibility is it was Luke’s way of saying Jesus embodied the Spirit and all she calls us too, he understood being claimed as G-d’s child wasn’t just about him but who we’re all called to be. So he embodied this in everything he said and did, showing them G-d’s dominion wasn’t the

empire. He touched those considered unclean, broke social boundaries, ate with “sinners”. Jesus lived in his skin what it means for G-d's realm to be all of us as siblings.

This is significant given our embodiment extends beyond being individuals. We're social bodies. We create societies, cultures. These ways to organize and relate to each other embody our values and beliefs and we are in turn shaped in our values and beliefs by the way we organize ourselves. Here are some examples. We delineate gender by colour, create different toy categories and even gender the same toy. Who needs pink “lego”? We embody relations with Indigenous peoples by what is and isn't funded, for example the consistent underfunding of infrastructure for drinking water. The physical reality of carding is a manifestation of race relations. The way we legislate land use is a way we embody our relationship with the Earth. Bill 66 is an example of choosing economy over ecology when a more collaborative approach could be taken. These are just a few of the ways we embody our beliefs. We reveal what we value and believe in physical ways. We reveal it in our cultures and societies and can choose to reveal an alternative value or belief.

This is what John did as well as Jesus. Earlier in our reading he was asked about the way they could change. His answers were practical - “If you have two cloaks give one to your neighbour who has none” - but he was telling them to give thought to the world around them, that what was important wasn't how many times they prayed but if they treated their neighbour as family. That is what it meant to be baptized by John and it still does. Baptism isn't just a ritual. Rather it signals who we are moving forward. Sacraments are visible signs of invisible grace not just for one moment. Baptized people are to be living sacraments, an embodiment of grace and blessing, and so called as individuals and as a spiritual community to model G-d's kin-dom right now.

In the first centuries of Christianity, church leaders understood that being baptized meant taking on a new way of being in the world. They enacted this by the person facing one way to renounce the world as it was, symbolized by Satan, and turning the other to pledge fidelity to the world as G-d would shape it, symbolized in their promise to follow Christ. They lived this out, embodying alternatives to the way their culture was organized: erasing divisions between slaves and free, calling women to leadership, sharing what they had. We well know culture has staying power with each generation facing new challenges and so we need to keep asking what it means in our day to embody the way of G-d's realm, a kin-dom where we honour the connections between us, strive to live as kin with the people sitting beside us, those living nearby, those on the other side of the world? How may we organize ourselves differently to show that we are siblings? How can we embody being family not just with other humans but with other creatures and with the Earth?

Today as Katayoon is baptized she promises to live with respect in creation, to seek justice, love and serve others, to join with the church as we strive to be kin. May we ponder our promises too. Every choice we make embodies who we are and desire to be. May we embody G-d's kin-dom. Amen.