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 1 Epiphany C – The Baptism of our Lord
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Image of God

When people came into worship they were given a small mirror.

You may recall that 1 of the 10 Commandments tells us not to make graven images and not to worship them. For Christians, this commandment has been interpreted to mean we shouldn't put other things in the place of God. For our Israelite forebears in faith, it meant more concretely not making idols or images of God.

But some scholars who study the development of the religion of the ancient Israelites think there's a possibility that originally, when the great Temple of Solomon was first built, it did contain an image of God.

So, imagine, when you enter the temple, you would go through the outer court, across the great stone pavement through the gates into the inner court. You would see its huge walls of hewn stone and walk past the enormous bronze altar of burnt sacrifice. You would pass great bronze basins carved with figures of lions and cherubim and palm trees. If you were permitted, you would walk farther and enter into the holy place and see its walls lined with cedar, with more carved figures of lions and cherubim and open flower blossoms, all overlaid with gold. You would walk across a floor of gold, and if you were allowed to keep walking deeper and deeper into the holy places of the temple, you would go, finally, into the place where only a high priest could go, the Holy of Holies -- and even the high priest could go only there once a year because it was such a holy place, the center of the temple, representing the center of the universe, the very heart of the holy. You would put on your most dazzling vestment, of glistening fabric, encrusted with 12 precious stones to represent the twelve tribes of Israel so you could go on behalf of the whole people of God, and you would pass through clouds of incense, and you would see the mercy seat of God, the ark of the covenant, the two great winged cherubim keeping watch over the ark of the covenant. But finally, in this most sacred place, in the center of the temple, in the center of the universe, in the very heart of holiness, you would behold the very image of God. What did that image look like?

Now is the time to take out your mirror. Look into that mirror. Yes – the image at the heart of the temple, the image of God, was an image of you.

Okay, so it wasn't a mirror exactly. It was a statue of a human being representing you, and me, created in the image of God. The image of the most holy being, in the most holy place the Israelites could construct, was an image of you, an image of me, an image of God.

This is not a foreign concept to us in the Episcopal Church. We know, we proclaim, we celebrate that every human being is made in the image of God. Every person God has ever made, every person God has ever put on this planet is made in God's image and loved by God. Just by existing, we are loved. And each of us bears no less than the image of God.

The difference our baptism makes for us is that we claim the image of God that we bear. We give thanks for that image, and we dedicate ourselves to the relationship God offers us in Christ, a relationship that says we will also respect God's image in others.

If the scholars are right, then our Israelite forebears were wise at some point to remove the statue. They were wise to realize that no one image, no one frozen statue, could fully convey the majesty, the manifold wonder of our God. They were wise to see the danger that people might confuse that particular image with God, or might think that only people who resembled that particular statue were in the image of God. The Israelites were wise to remove that statue but to pass along the wisdom of their elders, that from the beginning God made us – each one of us – male and female – in God's image. No one statue, no one likeness would do – we would all have to walk around bearing the image of God for one another. Look in your mirror. Look at one another.

And claim your baptism. Jesus did. He went through the waters of baptism ahead of us, claiming his identity as beloved child of God, ready to reflect the image of God to others, ready to show us God with a human face, ready to call us to a life in which we too say yes to God's promises to us, yes to God's call to us to be God's servants to God and one another, yes to a way of life that reflects the light and love of God to the people around us and into every dark place in the world that is crying out for the light.

Author Robert Fulghum says whenever he attends lectures and the speaker says, "Are there any questions?" Fulghum always asks, "What's the meaning of life?" because, you never know, someone may have the answer. And once he asked that

question and got a serious response. Fulghum was in Greece at a conference at which Alexander Papaderos, doctor of philosophy and politician, was speaking. Papaderos concluded his lecture and asked, “Are there any questions?” So Fulghum asked, “What’s the meaning of life?” Papaderos answered by opening his wallet and taking out a round mirror the size of a quarter.

He said, “When I was a child we were very poor. One day on the road I found the pieces of a broken mirror. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together but it was impossible, so I kept the largest piece. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated that I could reflect light into dark places. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find. . . . As I became a man I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game, but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light – truth, understanding, knowledge – will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it. I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with that, I can reflect light into the dark places of this world and perhaps others will see and do likewise. That is what I am about. This is the meaning of life.” And then he took his small mirror and, holding it carefully, caught the bright rays of daylight streaming through the window and reflected them onto Fulghum’s face.

In baptism, we claim God’s free gift of love to us. We claim the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us so that we can follow Jesus who was the light of the world, who showed us God with a human face, who bids us to bear the image of God and reflect the light and love of God into dark places.

Amen.