

Sermon: *Depending Upon Gifts (Octopus Sermon, Part II)*  
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels by the Sea, 1.7.24

Happy New Year! It feels like I have not seen you since last year. Also, Happy Epiphany! I love the season of Epiphany. It is the season of light, of new knowledge and wisdom, of introspection and shining the light of Christ from inside out. My favorite way of looking at Epiphany is a cartoon image of someone with a light bulb over their head. It's a new thought, new wisdom, new insight. It's a great season and I look forward to journeying with you through it.

Today is an amazing day. We are celebrating both the visit of the Magi to the Holy Family and their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh; and, we are celebrating the baptism of Jesus. Unlike most of us, Jesus was not baptized as an infant. It came much much later. So we have the image of Jesus as a child with the gifts and the gift of baptism when he started his public ministry. It's a very exciting day.

Now, I am breaking a rule of preaching, which is this: on the first Sunday back from vacation, always tell the congregation about it. They won't care what the preacher has to say about the Gospel until they know that you had a good vacation (or not). So yes, I had a great vacation. My wife and I went on a six-night Celebrity cruise over New Years Day. We left from Tampa, went to the Cayman Islands, then Cozumel – where I swam in the water, and we ate fish ceviche and guacamole and had margaritas on the beach, then back to Tampa. Before our kids, Christi and I used to celebrate New Year's Eve every year at the Seattle Center. There's a large park, with a band, and then at midnight the elevator of the Space Needle goes up as we count down and then watch a firework show celebrating the new year. ... Then we had kids and would be in bed before midnight. This year, however, we left the kids at home and had a fantastic time together and took part in a massive on-board New Years Eve celebration party. It was great.

Okay, now that I have told you about my vacation, let's talk about the Gospel.

With the gifts of the magi and the baptism of Jesus, I have been thinking about this concept: of dependence and independence. As Americans, we love independence. We even have a day where we celebrate Independence. ... As people of faith, however, we need to focus on our dependence on God and to increase, as we age, our dependence on God. As we depend more on God so we too become more independent from fear and anxiety.

Imagine this, the Psalm we read this morning – 29 – focuses on the majesty, the grandeur, the power and might of God. *The voice of the Lord strips the forests bare, shakes the wilderness, and makes mountains skip like a calf.* It's the awesome power and force of God. And then, we have the birth of Jesus. All this power, and majesty, and might and splendor, all wrapped up in a baby. A tiny baby. God is certainly independent and sovereign. And yet, God has become the baby Jesus – completely and utterly dependent.

We are mammals. Most mammals, when they are born, have to start walking and being independent right away. Not us; no, humans are born completely dependent. We can't even crawl for over six months; much less get up and walk. Take for example a giraffe; when it is born it has a six-foot drop to the ground and then has to stand up on its own and start walking. Same with an elephant. But not us, no, we are dependent. ... and dependent for quite a while.

What is the epiphany here about dependence and independence?

What if Jesus – with all the power and splendor of God – learned to be dependent. Speaking of learning how to be dependent, how about his earthly parents. Joseph is a carpenter which is an independent occupation. Back in Joseph's day, carpenters are independent business men. They are in charge of sales, marketing, accounts receivable, engineering, sourcing, human resources, contracts, shipping and customer service. It's a one-man show. The epiphany here is that Joseph, being independent by his occupation, had to learn to be dependent on others. In this case, on the generosity of these "*Men from the East who brought gifts to the child.*" The gifts are commodities. They are easy to transport and sell or trade anywhere in the world. Joseph needed those gifts, was dependent upon those gifts, because he had to take his family to the foreign land of Egypt to flee from what King Herod was planning on doing. It would take him a while to build up his book of business; in the meantime, he had the commodities to support his family.

How about Mary. I'd say she's an independent thinker. The angel Gabriel – The Angel Gabriel – speaks to her and she "*questions it all in her heart.*" That's an independent person right there. She questioned the message! And, after a little more discussion from the angel she then decided to let it be with her. She too had to learn to be dependent upon God, upon the magi, and upon all that was going to come her way.

Jesus is called Immanuel – *God is With Us*. God-is-with-us came to be fully human which, perhaps in his case, is to learn to be dependent on others. He was born in a stable, in the house of a stranger, with animals and right out in the middle of creation. Talk about learning dependence the hard – or quick – way. His parents had to learn to be dependent and Jesus learned it too. So much so, that in the Gospel lesson of his baptism, the Baptizer, John, said, "*You want me to baptize you?? No no, it should be the other way around...*" Jesus responded that John must do this. Jesus is dependent upon John baptizing him. The stories you are going to hear for the next couple of weeks have to do with Jesus calling his disciples. He called them and then depended upon them. It's not a one-man-show; it's a calling and assembling of a religious movement. And it's one that Jesus, and the entire movement, will depend.

To say the next part, I need to make sure my knees don't buckle; because, if Jesus depended upon the apostles, that means, in part, he is depending on me. This was an epiphany for me because I depend upon Jesus. The thought that perhaps he depends on me too is something that, frankly, I had not thought of before. If Jesus depends on me, he depends on you too. He depends on you to do his will in the world around you – to help others, to pray, to be generous; Jesus is depending on you.

Some of you have noticed that I brought this bag. Let me hold it up. The bag says, *Celebrity Cruise* on it; I found it in the room, I took it in the hope that they meant for us to take it. In this bag are some gifts that I have received. The first gift I'd like to show you is this: a small, wooden octopus. I was given this octopus after I preached about octopuses [and yes, the plural of octopus is octopuses not octopi]. It was made from a 3-D printer. It sits on a desk lamp in my office and makes me smile.

I preached about octopuses because they are unique in the animal kingdom and give us a glimpse into God's amazing and awesome power and glory and might and God's incredible diversity. Did you know that an octopus can do more than just pick things up with its tentacles? Octopuses can taste and smell with their tentacles. More than that, they can "see" the color of whatever object they are holding and then change their color to match. They can also change their texture so that it looks like a rock or a piece of seaweed. In a wonderful show on PBS about a marine biologist and his teenaged daughter who brought an octopus into their living room to live with it and study it; the biologist noted that when the octopus touched his daughter's hand, it could tell her emotional mood and then adjust its mood accordingly.

Octopuses are amazing and yet completely dependent upon their environment. They have no offensive skills and the only defense they have is by mimicking whatever it is they are attached to or disappearing in a cloud of ink. They are completely dependent on their environment. And, they are a gift for humans to interact with and study. They solve puzzles, they are naturally sneaky, they play games, they dream and even communicate. And, they depend completely on the environment they are placed in. It reminds me of how Jesus and the Holy Family were completely dependent on the environment Jesus was born into. They needed the gifts from the magi. Jesus then depended upon John the baptizer and his apostles and he depends upon us now. What a gift.

Speaking of gifts; you know, I preach once about octopuses and then I get octopus gifts. I have this wooden octopus. But how about this: I received this large coffee mug; and this octopus picture; and then this coffee mug which turns colors when it's warm (it's an octopus thing – to change colors). And then there is this thing. It is about eighteen inches long and sits on a bookshelf. Four tentacles go out longways along the top of the shelf and then these four tentacles hang down the side of the bookshelf. When I place it here with the magi and the manger scene, this might be the first time an octopus was a part of a crèche scene, but, to me, it shows how we are dependent upon one another and we bring gifts for one another. (And now I'll remove it so to not get in trouble with those who might be offended than an octopus is next to the ox and sheep)

Jesus depends on me and you to continue in the way of love and forgiveness that he showed to us in his life, his teachings and healings and in the sacraments. I depend upon you. The governing board of this church – the Vestry – receives your offerings and pay me a livable stipend so that I can do this full time. You all depend upon the grace and peace and forgiveness of God through Christ. Jesus' ministry in our day and time depends upon you. I am overjoyed and thankful to be

here to and to serve and lead here and I depend upon you and, in part, your spiritual journey depends on me.

On this amazing day, the first Sunday of 2024; the day we celebrate the arrival of the magi with their gifts for Jesus, the day we celebrate the baptism of Jesus and the opening of eternal life to all through the waters of baptism; on this amazing day, I think of the baby Jesus, how he depends upon Mary and Joseph, how they depend upon God and the magi's gifts; I think about the octopus gifts and all that you all give me and how I depend on you, you depend on me, we all depend upon God and Jesus' ministry depends on this.

With all of these things on this amazing day, I'd like you to take a moment of Epiphany to reflect on being dependent. Who are you depending on and who depends on you? I'd like you to think about being dependent upon God, and one another. I'd like you to consider that as depend more on God we become more independent from fear and anxiety. I invite you to explore this Epiphany on who do you depend upon; who depends upon you; and how much you depend upon God.

At different times in our lives, we are both the magi and the baby – we give gifts and receive gifts. At different points in our lives, we are both Mary and Joseph – learning to be dependent and learning to be faithful. As we head through this amazing season Epiphany; the season of wisdom and of light; let us consider increasing our dependence upon God and finding our independence away from anxiety and fear.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.