

The First Sunday of Epiphany

January 7, 2007

*Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 89:1-29 or 89:20-29
Acts 10:34-38
Luke 3:15-16,21-22*

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

My father's parents had a summer cottage at the Des Plains Methodist Campgrounds near the northwest side of Chicago. They had bought the cottage in the '20's when many members of their church, The First Methodist Church of Irving Park, were doing so. It was a sort of summer retreat at least for a few weeks, not far from the city. The campgrounds had a summer hotel; a swimming pool, big at least to a little boy; tabernacles, round buildings with sawdust floors and wooden benches. On summer evenings all the old hymns would fill those tabernacles.

Of much greater interest to my cousin Jan and me was the Des Plains River for which the campgrounds had been named. It wasn't a very big river; it didn't flow very swiftly, but it was wet, and it had marshy and muddy banks that were irresistible to two little boys. We spent hours and hours playing by the river, just a few yards from the screened porch of the summer cottage.

On the opposite bank of the river was a picnic and sports area called Rand Park. One Saturday, and I know it must have been Saturday because Sundays were filled with things directed toward personal and group piety, there was a big event across the river. There was a

big gathering with a preacher, whom I would now call charismatic, whose voice carried clearly across the water. He was dipping people in the Des Plains River. Jan and I were entranced; we sat in the reeds and watched it all. In retrospect I suppose what we watched was a genuine, old-time revival.

I've been thinking that a revival was going on at the banks of a similar river, the Jordan, led by a charismatic preacher, John, calling for repentance, with lots of people being immersed in the river water, two thousand years ago. That's real staying power.

Why do people go to revivals? They go for many reasons, I am sure. I think some go out of pure curiosity, not unlike two little boys on the bank of the Des Plains. It is quite colorful and exciting and, in a way, mysterious. Perhaps some go as thrill-seekers. That just doesn't sound right, does it?

I actually knew a man who went to all sorts of revivals and always went forward whenever there was an altar call. He said it was to encourage the actual sinners. There are sinners, lots and lots of them. I think the vast majority of people at revivals are sinners and people who think they are. That's guilt.

Guilt is an incredibly powerful thing, and its power can be both bad and good. There are people who carry such a powerful sense of guilt, some deep-seated dark secret, that they are paralyzed. They are trapped within themselves. They lead truly tragic and desperate lives. But, if that guilt and desperation lead them back to God, to repent, confess, and accept His forgiveness, that same guilt has done good work: a person can be restored.

There was Jesus on that Jordan bank, come to be baptized. Why? I think there could be many reasons, none of which imply that Jesus carried guilt. Jesus was sinless and guiltless, but Jesus was compassionate. He could look about into the eyes of the faces of that gathering and see His ministry unfolding. Jesus was there as a sign

of His complete dedication to God and as a sign of His acceptance of the future.

Jesus at the Jordan completely identified Himself with all those He is called to save through His Crucifixion and Resurrection. Jesus was baptized in the midst of sinners. Jesus lived His life in the midst of sinners, and, ultimately, Jesus died between two sinners, one of whom heard and answered a call to repentance.

In His Holy Name.