



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR ENGAGEMENT & CONNECTION
THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY: THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD, JANUARY 8, 2023
ISAIAH 42:1-9; PSALM 29; ACTS 10:34-43; MATTHEW 3:13-17

A STORY OF IDENTITY

Matthew 3:13-17 *[In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”]*

Our son John was baptized when he was two months old at the Episcopal Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City. He wore a hand-made white christening gown given to him by my mother-in-law and he slept peacefully while the priest took him from my arms and baptized him.

Will and I were so thrilled – and overwhelmed – at being new parents, and my heart was full watching our families witness and bless this sacrament. It was beautiful -- I felt the presence of Holy Spirit around my tiny son and cried pretty much throughout the service.

And then in the taxi on the way to the restaurant for a festive lunch with family and our priest, John had the most dramatic diaper explosion of his young life. The intestinal lava flowed all the way up to his neck and down to his feet, leaving his linen gown soaked and unwearable. So, all the pictures of that day show him in a plain white cotton onesie – the only other clothing I had in the diaper bag.

And I'm reminded that the most sublime experiences of our life take place in the muck and imperfection of being fully human.

Our gospel today – the account of Jesus' baptism by John – is a story of identity. It establishes who Jesus is to God and to his disciples, and it also grounds our selfhood in the symbols and meaning of baptism.

All four gospels recount Jesus' baptism in Jordan, and though there are minor differences, each says that after Jesus is baptized, the Holy Spirit descends upon him and a heavenly voice proclaims, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Some translations read, "This is my beloved Son," but the original Greek text is clear that "beloved" does not modify "Son." God names Jesus twice: This is the Beloved

and this is my Son, with whom I am well pleased.

This is the Beloved. The Beloved is Jesus' identity since the beginning, when the Word was with God and the Word was God. This Word – the Beloved -- becomes flesh and dwells among us, full of grace and truth – and also familiar with the muck and imperfection of being fully human. That is the gift we celebrated two weeks ago at Christmas.

Baptism is the first great sacrament of the Church, a liturgical affirmation that we are also children of God – "heirs by adoption," St. Paul says -- and that we share in Christ's relationship with God.

August and Sylvan, two brothers to be baptized at the 9 am service, will feel water poured over their heads in the name of the Triune God and will be anointed with fragrant oil, signifying the descent of the Holy Spirit on them, establishing them as Beloved and Christ's own forever.

Of course, every person is beloved by God from the moment of their being. Baptism doesn't make that happen – it is already true! But Baptism makes this identity as the Beloved visible and audible and touchable.

And so, these two children follow the pattern of Jesus' early life -- birth, naming, visitation of magi, and now baptism. You might think that only Jesus and his parents received visits from wise people bearing gifts but consider all the neighbors and family and friends who show up when a baby is born, bringing food, diapers, and extra arms for rocking. Magi are everywhere.

Baptism is about identity. It tells us who we are -- a child of God and God's Beloved. Part of the body of Christ and a particular faith community. It's also about how we are to live. We hear that in the baptismal covenant, but Matthew's gospel uniquely includes an encounter that goes to the heart of how we live out this identity.

When Jesus comes to be baptized by John, John resists, "I'm the one who should be baptized by you!" But Jesus replies, "Let it be that you baptize me. It is proper to fulfill all righteousness." So John agrees. What just happened? What does Jesus mean?

We need to look at the meaning of righteousness. It comes from the Jewish tradition, referring to a way of living that is deemed right by God. When the Old Testament prophets exhort the Israelites to

righteous living, they speak particularly of justice, mercy, and humility. Justice as equity, dignity, and freedom for all. Mercy as compassion and care for those who suffer or have lost their way. And humility as full recognition of our equality and interconnection.

When Jesus comes to John for baptism, John is taken aback because he -- and everyone else -- know that Jesus' wisdom and knowledge of God surpasses theirs. How can he possibly be the one to take the inferior position?

But maybe that is exactly the thinking that Jesus wants to refute. The idea that worthiness is correlated with education or power or status. When Jesus insists John baptize him (and later, when he washes Peter's feet at the last supper), he is showing that worthiness is not derived from earthly assessments of superiority or cultural hierarchies but from one's essential identity as God's beloved.

As Jesus takes his place among the people waiting to be baptized by John, he embraces his full humanity and stands in solidarity with those who are wounded by the cruelties of this world and who long for a new beginning. When Jesus asks John to baptize

him, he affirms that every person, no matter their power or wisdom, has spiritual gifts to share and can be a means of communicating God's grace.

There is a holy mutuality here – Jesus cannot take on his ministry without John's baptism and John cannot baptize him without Jesus' assurance it is right. Such mutuality is faithful to God's desires for the world – it is righteousness.

As you reaffirm the baptismal covenant today and remember your own baptism, may you claim your own identity as God's Beloved, even in the muck and imperfection of full humanity. May you know your birthright of worthiness and daily, actively honor that of every person.

Amen.



Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!