



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, January 10, 2021

Scripture Passages: Genesis 1:1-5 & Mark 1:4-11

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

As far as I'm concerned, 2021 has got some explaining to do.

Well here we are in Epiphanytide. Seems pretty apt that the season of the church that begins with prophecy and danger and the clash between worldly power and God's mission of love is where we begin this year in our context too. Apt but sad. But this has always been the case, hasn't it? The Gospel has been proclaimed for 2000 years in contexts of war and peace, plenty and famine, plague and health and in each context we have drawn strength and sense from its proclamation.

There are so many things we could think about this morning: so many worries we could publish as a result of the events of Wednesday last:

- about the impact all this has on our children and youth who are learning how to live in this world;
- about the undiluted, unobstructed white privilege on display;
- about the degree to which division and dehumanization has entered our civic discourse.

But instead, I'd like to talk to you about baptism. It'll make sense, I promise you.

As ever, when I'm thinking about baptism, the example of the great Martin Luther the 16th century German reformer popped into my head. A strange thing you might think, but not really. You see, way back in the mists of time when I was at theological college the connection between Luther and baptism was set in my head. I read in my studies about all the ways and times in which Luther referenced his baptism as the touchstone of his faith and I've never forgotten it.

So very many times in his writings we come across the phrase “For I am baptized, . . .” If Luther was afraid, if Luther was confused, if he was trying to sort out life priorities in light of his faith; if he was joyful; if he was angry, if he was under threat; he seemed to use that phrase. “For I am baptized” as a touchstone aware that it changed everything.

Now why did he do that? What did he mean by it? What did Luther see and experience through the sacrament of baptism? I think we need to go back to our Gospel for today.

Because you see, I don't think that St. Mark tells us about Jesus' baptism only to inform us about what happened to Jesus. I think he tells this story also to show us something about the significance of our own baptisms as well – about the power of that act in our lives – about how that act orients our lives. So the things that are true about Jesus' baptism are as true about our own baptism as well.

So, for me a couple of things about St. Mark's account stand out. First, baptism is about identity. Notice that the voice from heaven – God's voice - is addressed to Jesus in the first person: “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

I think baptism tells us who we are – God's beloved children – and it tells us that God is pleased with us – for who we are - in the same way that a parent is pleased with their children just for being.

And we mustn't just let the simplicity of that realization just move past us. Having an identity, belonging, is a deep human craving. It is visceral.

In a time when so many of the traditional ways in which we construct our identity – the many ways that we define ourselves both to ourselves and the world - have changed – and so radically in this last year in particular because of the upheaval of the pandemic and political forces. For instance, we change our jobs and careers often, we have unprecedented physical mobility and many of us have moved around rather than living in a single community resting on and building history; even the composition of our families change more often, and those are the more ordinary reasons for losing identity – we haven't grappled with displacement, or economic hardship, or illness or pandemics or other kinds of disaster. So many of the ways we used to construct our identities are gone.

And yet there is still a deep desire to figure out just who we are and where we belong. Some of the images we saw on Wednesday are a sad manifestation of that human need to belong – to have identity. But they are sad because they are so idolatrous – to place a human figure, or political ideas or a party, in the place of God is to make idols in this world.

Baptism reminds us that we discover who we are in relation to whose we are. In baptism we learn and affirm that we are God's beloved children. We belong to God's family, and baptism is a tangible sign of that – and that changes stuff.

As humans it seems we're hardwired to seek belonging – it's a state and an emotional connection that we need in order to flourish. We are not good alone. We seek groupings, partnerships, relationships. We truly are created for God and for the image of God in one another. And for that reason belonging is really important to us.

And just as the Lord says those words of belonging over Jesus – “You are my Son” they are also words that apply to us. Because they are words of belonging – in our case, of adoption – both words that show we belong to Christ in God in the power of the Holy Spirit, but also that we belong to the family of God – a family that includes our own, but that also expands the meaning of family in really important ways. This is really important folks. Baptism as the entry into the Christian family expands the family, it doesn't make it smaller.

If we are one in Christ – all our human made barriers are set aside by being included in a new family: like St. Paul says, neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free. And – well, that changes all our relationships. It does really.

Something else that our baptism tells us is this: as we come up out of the waters of baptism, we are a new creation. That's why we read the first few verses of the beautiful account of creation. God is so creative – a master artist - Our God is a God of creation – of creativity – of making new creations – of making new people, new health, making things right, of restitution,

We don't talk enough about the creativity of God – if we did we sure wouldn't look backward as much as we do. We'd embrace difference and diversity and beauty with our whole hearts rejoicing in this God who is about life and regeneration and making new and beautiful things, communities. We would be straining toward that God eager to know what God is going to do next.

You see the God of Creation, our Father in Heaven is not a God of destruction.

And what happened on Wednesday evening was an act of destruction.

In the beginning – God creates and what God creates is good.

In baptism we are a new creation and that is good too.

But it's also something that we need to visit and re-visit all our lives long to make sure we're tracking with what our baptism means in real terms: the rewriting of things like our definition of family, of what it means to belong in Christian community and what friendship and acceptance and belonging then looks like and to whom we extend all those things – especially when we feel challenged by our own self-interest.

Because all of that is different because of what we experience because in our baptism. And it's something that - like Martin Luther - we need to keep touching as our world changes constantly around us. As it changes it demands that we bring ever-fresh understandings of these truths – and that's constantly challenging – constantly forcing us to see how endlessly generous and inclusive God's love is. That really is good news.

And here's more good news: baptism is God's work.

And if that's the case, then that says something important about this relationship that we're entering into in Baptism. It says that no matter how often we fall short or fail, nothing that we do, or fail to do, no matter how often we sin, nothing can remove the identity that God gives us. Our relationship with God, that is, is the one relationship in life we can't screw up precisely because it doesn't depend on us. We can neglect this relationship, we can deny it, run away from it, ignore it, but we can't destroy it, for God loves us too deeply and completely to ever let us go, "for we are baptized." Again, in an age when so many relationships are fragile or confused, it's such good news that this primary relationship is constant no matter what. With this character and depth, the hope is that it becomes the foundation for all our other important relationships – we are loved so much by God and we give our love out of the overflow of that - and that that too changes our lived reality. And what a gift that is.

You know, often the baptismal font is right at the entrance of our local church. Just as you come inside the door - you can't miss it – in fact it's easy to bump into it. I often think that the location of that pool of water is a strong reminder that we keep bumping into our baptism, Luther-like, all our lives - and we also keep bumping into what it asks of us.

We can't ignore it. That font is a reminder how we began our faith journey. As we dip our fingers into the water and sign ourselves with the cross, on entering the church, we are also reminded that baptism was just the beginning of our call to follow Jesus.

The Spirit we received at our baptism continues to urge and encourage us on this path – right up to the present moment. When we were baptized we not only received the name we would carry for the rest of our lives, but like Jesus our identity and mission were fixed – we were also named "beloved" in the power of the Father, and Son and the Holy Spirit, and called to follow the path Jesus walked. Over the course of our lives our identity and mission will mature, as we try our best to serve God and God's mission of love in this world as Jesus served God.

All of which brings us back to the spectacle we witnessed this past Wednesday. There was a very uncomfortable fusion of apparently Christian words and symbols with the symbols and actions of white supremacy. It was a profoundly shocking sight. It was wrong.

Here's the thing: it has been very clear to us in the west, through decades of decline that God is calling us to something new – a new creation: a church which is focused on the conversion of hearts and minds to Jesus' way of love – and not to a church focused on the fearful defense of worldly power.

What we saw on Wednesday was the death throes of old Christendom – the time when the Church had a purchase on worldly power and influence – a grip that was not good for our souls.

And what we see on our horizon is a new creation.

The last thing I want to say about Jesus' baptism (today anyway) is that his baptism was not a private, but a public affair. Jesus didn't insist that John baptize him further up the Jordan River with only his mother and a few family members and friends present. Jesus' baptism was public – and so should each Christian's be – a public act for people who are called to live their Christian vocation in public ways. There is little that is private about our vocation to follow Christ, there is little that should be. Jesus reminds us that "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

And it seems to me that the beginning of a New Year, is a good time to remember that our identity, who and whose we are and what that means for how we are to live.

Because the Christian vocation is always the same: it's to reveal the love of God to the entire human race. While the public mission and ministry of Jesus began at the waters of Jordan, it continues through His Church, of which we are made members through our own baptisms.

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