

SERMON – THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD – 17 JANUARY 2021

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Mark Menees, D.D.

The Baptism of our Lord

Isa. 43: 1-7

Acts

Luke 2: 15-17; 21-22

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

Many of you will remember the comedienne Lilly Tomlin, known for the plethora of characters she created for her skits. She brought us Ernestine, the obnoxious telephone operator who constantly snorted into the receiver and asked, "Is this the party to which I am speaking?", and Edith Anne, the young girl sitting in an oversized rocking chair who told all the family secrets accompanied by her imaginary dog, Butthster. Along the way she coined numerous one liners; "Don't worry about failure. Behind every failure is an opportunity someone wishes they had missed", and "why is it when we talk to God we call it praying, but when God talks to us we call it schizophrenia?" In an interview about her career she was asked if she had always wanted to do stand-up comedy. "Oh no", Tomlin replied. "All my life I just wanted and asked to be **somebody**. Now I can see I should have been more specific"! Let me ask each one of you; when you look into the mirror at morning, do you see who you have hoped to be? Have you arrived where you thought you have been born to be? Is this stopping point on the trail one you envisioned for yourself even with all the twists and turns that have gotten you here? And far more importantly what in this place and time has God carved out for you? What does God want for you?

The simple truth is every one of us here is on a journey seeking to be "**somebody**". We have written on the world, on the lives of our companions, families, and acquaintances words and actions that are part of our autobiographies, many of which have lasting import and impact. When we have either nurtured or wounded another soul we have inscribed a presence into their lives. In our quests to "be somebody"; to be true to who we are, the overriding question before us is this: what paths are we travelling to fulfill our destinies? To be specific, what are the values, the vision, the choices, and the commitments that are the signature we place on life as members of God's people? Those last few words, as God's people, are the most significant, because this has to do with how we are formed and being made into the representation of Christ. In the search to find what our lives mean at their deepest places we need a center, a core image, a home base, out of which we see ourselves, one another, and all the options that come our way.

Our culture has a number of buttons to punch in search of a center. Go to Barnes and Noble (one of my favorite haunts) and browse the 'self-help' aisle. You will find numerous volumes beginning with the word 'I' our 'Your', like "Your Best Self". I once saw a catchy title, "Humility and How I Achieved It". Perhaps it is time to look in another direction.

The center and guiding image is presented in the Church Calendar today in the Baptism of our Lord. Oddly, last week we were at the Epiphany with three gifts, wise men, a star, and Herod the madman, and now suddenly we are at Jesus' adulthood, baptism, and the start of his mission. St. Mark leaves all of the birth narrative in order to get to this; this story which is a pivotal moment in the Gospels. It originally was a bit of an embarrassment for the Church. Jesus submits to baptism, and of all people did not need it. Yet rather than downplay it, Mark holds it up and is telling us that in this action we will find the heart and core of Jesus' life and ministry, and our own journeys as well. Jesus stands shoulder to shoulder *with us*. Baptism is the beginning, ending, and paradigm of what it means to be somebody; not just anybody, but God's somebody. The One who is called Beloved son is now calling each of us the same.

We all need a beginning place, a starting point in life that becomes our companion and that we look back to in order to see if we are going where we believe we are called to go. When we feel lost and our vision becomes clouded by the challenges we encounter, and those phone calls pile up beyond counting, and the pain of life becomes too much, we yearn to hear words like, "You are my loved one and I am pleased with who you are". Far too often the image we have of ourselves and of where we have come to be is distorted. This is the effect of sin-not badly chosen deeds-but sin as the state that lies to us about

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our true image. Baptism is just the needed starting place for through it we are told two things, who we really **are**, and that we **belong**. Equally we are invited to begin a journey where we can live a life full of meaning. That meaning comes by walking the path of our Lord, which is a life of service and giving because we belong to God whose very nature is to give—restored to our status!

When I was a university student the fraternity of which I was a member had a tradition of taking its pledges off for a long ride. The trick pulled off is that the poor fellow was blindfolded, put in a car with brothers, taken to some far-flung destination, and dropped off with only fifty cents in his pocket in order to get back. My turn came around and the same pattern was used. Late in the afternoon I was left on a street in a small Tennessee town to find my way. Removing the blindfold, I found myself standing forlornly in front of a small pharmacy with a pay phone. However, much to my surprise that pharmacy was a block away from the parish church of the town where my father was the pastor, and only a short distance from the parsonage. Not only did I get a good home cooked meal but arrived back at the fraternity house just shortly after my brothers had. No one ever said Sig Eps were all that bright!! Knowing where home base is can make all the difference in what path we choose!

Baptism is our home base. It is true Jesus did not “need” to be baptized. But he does so in order to say yes to his Father and thus bear witness for us of what life lived in faithfulness to God is like. This is not so much for his sake as for ours. St. Hippolytus wrote of this passage, “If the Lord had yielded to John’s persuasion and had not been baptized do you realize what blessings we would have been deprived of?...The Lord was not only baptized himself; he also renewed our fallen nature and restored us to our status as God’s children. The world we see was reconciled with the world that lies beyond our vision...earthly disorders were remedied; mysteries revealed; enemies were made friends.” Baptism is the explosion of a new starting creation in us.

It is here the gift of the Holy Spirit confirms who Jesus is, but is also promised to be given to each of us. Here we see our future; a future marked by God claiming us as his own child. It means we belong to Him as surely as we had been tattooed with His branding iron. In fact, I often tell parents of children and adults to be baptized that we are placing on their foreheads the highest name our species has ever known!! This claim is not simply a private action between God and each of us. It is an action that makes us part of a community called to live differently than the culture around us. Just as God says ‘Yes’ to us in Christ, we are asked to say Yes to God’s calling now. To say Yes to God is to set our goal in life as a journey with Him, marked by faithfulness and trust, even when all around us would seem to point in different and easier directions. This is not about walking around with pious expressions or carrying a prayer book. It means taking God’s cause for the world as our own and accepting what He desires as our yearning and commitment. It is our home base. Jesus’ whole life and ministry pours forth out of this event, and so does ours.

Once we start down this path it is marked by two things, renunciation and affirmation. When Jesus submits to this action he is involved in a renunciation. He is rejecting personal gain, power, and aggrandizement. He is saying ‘No’ to using others for our own purposes or acting out of what is expedient. We know these. It is seen in our business leaders who make exorbitant bonuses while costing others their livelihood, and dare I say it—even in the obscene behavior and salaries of athletes or celebrities, who have become the model of the “good life”, but who are unable to meet even a minimal standard of decency. We hear people say, “nothing is wrong in and of itself—thinking makes it so, or we must be free to do our own thing.” But in belonging to God our own thing is God’s thing!! In this journey, begun in baptism we are given a sense of purpose and affirmation. We are told we belong, and we come to assert that life lived for others is the only way for the world to have justice and peace. It becomes the model of the path we take and measure of all we do. It is dying in order to come to real life. Baptism is the way Jesus cleanses

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us that we might be united with God, experience purifying love, and become somebody-God's people for the world.

Robert Frost, the great American poet wrote a short set of strophes called "The Road Not Taken". He speaks of looking down two roads that diverge one from the other and reflects on the options before him. One road is well travelled and looks the easier. He tells himself he will one day get to go down each but knows full well he will not likely come that way again. Finally, he chooses and reflects with these words:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

May our journeys be by a road that makes us who we are; God's own people. Amen+