

EPIPHANY ONE, YEAR B, JANUARY 10, 2021

In the Gospel lesson this morning we are told the heavens opened and the voice of God affirmed that this is God's "Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Think about that for a moment. While those words are especially meaningful in the gospel about Jesus, they are words which are spoken in a way to all of us. Basically, that is the declaration made at our baptism, yours and mine. If we are baptized in infancy or childhood, or as an adult, God has declared God's pleasure in us, we are worthy, and that we are God's beloved creatures.

You know you don't have to be baptized to be a beloved child of God. All you have to do is to be born. That is enough. We do baptisms to try to make visible what is the already existent eternal truth: that each one of us is a beloved and cherished child of God. And that's why we baptize, to make physical by water and the spirit, the indwelling spiritual DNA so to speak, that begins at our birth.

Now the voice that we hear when baptism is celebrated these days in the church are the voices that have spoken such words over the centuries: "Child of God I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." It is a phrase that has been intoned in the most solemn of baptisms in the highest and holiest cathedral churches of the world, and whispered at furtive services of baptism in the hidden yet faithful churches in ancient Rome and other parts of the world today. It has been spoken in makeshift settings by riverbanks and beside hospital gurneys, next to tiny bowls of water, and on the shores of mighty seas. It is a phrase that says and promises much more than the person saying it can possibly foresee, or the person receiving the words can fully comprehend.

The question could be asked, why does baptism matter? What is the voice speaking at baptism trying to say? Is baptism just a little drip of water, a few mumbled words? I would say no. Baptism matters because it is a reminder that we are who God says we are, regardless of what anyone else may say about us. Baptismal voices remind us that our true identity is not what we may think about ourselves or what others may ascribe to us, but what God has indicated about us, and God's word about us is always, "beloved child..." That is one reason baptism matters.

Secondly, baptism for Jesus was an encounter with the Holy Spirit that led him into a life of ministry. It was, for him, a pivotal and watershed experience, the beginning of the mission for which he had been preparing. It was the moment in which he was chosen and set aside by God. It was followed by his full commitment to the ministry to which God was calling him and he lived as God's beloved.

Just as Baptism marked the beginning of ministry for Jesus; it also marks the beginning of ministry for each of us. Baptism is something to be lived every day. At the heart of our Christian faith is the fact that by baptism each of us is brought into a loving relationship with a loving God. At our baptism God is there, saying, "You are everything to me. You matter. You are important. You are my child." We need to live every day knowing that by baptism we are the beloved of God.

Some of you might of read or saw the movie *The Help*. The author, Kathryn Stockett, makes this point about being beloved very poignantly. The book is set in 1962 in Jackson, Mississippi. It portrays what it must've been like to be an African-American maid working in a white household in the South in the emerging days of the civil rights

movement. In the beginning of the book, one of the heroines is an African-American maid by the name of Aibileen. Aibileen goes to work in a white household after the tragic death of her son. She goes, as she says, to raise her 17th white child. In the household that she goes into there's a little girl by the name of Mae Mobley. But her mother manages to call Mae Mobley, "it" and to reinforce in every way possible that she's not worthy and she's not beloved, but a bother and that she's bad.

It breaks Aibileen's heart and she sets about to try and turn off those voices and to help this baby girl who, she calls Baby Girl, claim for herself her true self. And she teaches her from the time that Baby Girl can talk, "Repeat after me: you are smart; you are kind; you are important." And then has her repeat it.

Aibileen of all people probably understood better than most what it must be like to try and live in your true identity when the voices around you would try and tell you something else—that you are unworthy. At the end of the book Aibileen has to leave that household; she's fired. And it's heartbreaking to Aibileen that she's not able to explain to Baby Girl the circumstances. As she's leaving she leans down and they are both crying at the thought of having to be separated. And she says, "Baby Girl, remember what I told you. What did I say to you?" Baby Girl looks deeply into her eyes and she says, "I am smart. I am kind. I am important." She is hearing the voice of God saying to her, "You are beloved and with you I am well pleased."

Being beloved of God carries with it an enormous responsibility. It is in the Scripture readings. It is in the Baptismal Covenant that we say every time we have a baptism. At baptisms I ask "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers?" We reply, "We will with God's help." We get our spiritual nurturing by meeting as a community for fellowship and prayer whether that is in person or virtually. To be a part of a community is important as it supports us and encourages us to be all that God calls us to be. To be a Christian is to be a living, breathing, Epiphany – an outward and visible sign of hope in a world that is broken by impatience and self-absorption.

To be baptized into the life of Christ means that you are showing what is often hiding right in plain view. It means that you recognize that you have the potential to do something great, to be someone who makes a difference, even against great odds. It means that we understand the possibilities we possess to change the imbalances in the world and take our place with other Christians who have committed themselves, through baptism, to be agents of reconciliation, justice and peace. To be a Christian is to be one of God's epiphanies – an outward and visible sign of the miraculous power of God's incarnate love which we know in Christ Jesus, to heal this broken world. Our birth is one of those epiphanies. Our baptism is another epiphany.

The last question in the baptismal covenant is, "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" The vocation of the Christian life and witness is to shed light on issues of justice. It is the great commandment once again. We are called to love God and to love neighbor.

In our baptism we were brought into an intimate relationship with a loving God. You are God's beloved child. Claim that. Bask in it. Live in the joy and confidence of it. Experience it in your life. Today let us renew our baptismal commitment to bear witness to the Good News of the kingdom of God in both word and deed. Let us remind ourselves once again who we are, to whom we belong, and who we are called to be. Listen to the

one true voice who declares to you, "You are my son; you are my daughter, beloved, and with you I am well pleased." Amen.