

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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It's Hard to Believe, but It's the Truth

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 12, 2014

The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of our Lord—Based on Matthew 3:13-17

Today is the Baptism of our Lord, the first Sunday after the Epiphany. It is a glorious day at the start of the new year, but for me it also annually signals an ending of sorts. It means that the holidays really are over. For several weeks there has been a great deal of leeway for not having everything done. You know how this goes: "It's the holidays and so many people are away; let me get back to you when things settle down." Or "Oh, taxes, yes, yes, of course, taxes; as soon as the holidays end, I'll get right on that." Or my personal favorite "Oh, eat, drink—it's the holidays; I will return to the gym in a few weeks." I have literally said those words this season—said them in the full knowledge that I have not been to a gym in 20 years, except on occasion to get a massage, which by the way does not count as exercise except perhaps for the masseuse.

So, happy New Year everyone. I missed the chance to say that to you last week. And now for a little reality check: If your Christmas wreath isn't down, take it down this afternoon. And for heaven's sake get rid of the tree; even artificial trees start shedding by January 15th. It is time to get a grip, settle in for some cold days ahead without whining, lower your head and work hard. The Baptism of our Lord has come again. Say hallelujah!

Despite that little lecture mostly about me, there is some wonderful news to be told! I decided this year not to plumb the regular questions about why Jesus got baptized, assuming that he did. And I do, by the way, assume that he did. I see no reason to suspect the very likely historicity of this occasion. But I have, like most people, wondered why Jesus needed to be baptized. Was it just to show us that we should be? In the waters of his baptism was he buried to an old life of sin and raised to newness of life when he arose from the waters? There are some theological thorns there. Knowing those answers may be just a bit over our pay grade and, much more importantly, knowing them, if we truly could, probably wouldn't change our lives much anyway.

Even admitting such unknowing about baptism, it is never hard for me to say why I believe so fully and joyfully in it. At one pretty significant level I believe in it because it is **the** rite of initiation into the Christian church. That is big, and I like it. I can't go so far as to say that I think every person in the world should be baptized. Other religious faiths have alternative initiation rites, which I accept and honor even as I cherish the way we do it. In part it is that the ritual itself is important—though not all ritualized behavior is. When most of us enter an elevator or a train, we almost always look at our gadget, usually our phone, but that doesn't mean that checking our email or text is a ritual. It just means we do it regularly, maybe obsessively. Rituals, though, that intentionally convey something beyond the physical, the literal, are desperately important because they signify that there is more than what meets the eye. In a few moments when we baptize these cherished children, our language will be metaphorical and mystical, much more than literal. People often say to me, "I can't understand why I tear up so often in church, at the Eucharist, at weddings, at baptisms." I can; I understand it easily. We tear up because something a lot more substantial than what is immediately apparent is being approached, accessed, longed for, or imagined. Tears well up in our eyes when we sense something deep; and as Fred Buechner so rightly said, when tears come, God is near always—whether they are tears of sadness or tears of joy. Ritual—it's good for us; do it often.

But ritual is not the only reason I am sold on baptism. Far from it. I am devoted to it because I know that it speaks to a primal need that I have—and if it is primal for me, it is probably primal for all of us: the need to belong. Behaviorists tell us that at the root of much destructive behavior—from the neurotic self-sabotaging of relationships and opportunities we so often engage in our lives to the truly anti-social behavior of the sociopath—a deep sense of not belonging is to be found. Save for some acts of terrorism, every notorious school or mall shooting of our era has given rise to stories about a loner, a misfit, about one who does not—at least as he/she sees it—belong.

Jesus was baptized as an outward, visible sign of his place in his universe. The scripture says, “Just as he came up from the water, a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” His baptism told him anew who he was and that he was loved, a knowing that prepared him for what was to come.

And so it is for us. When we rise from the baptismal font and when we renew our baptismal vows, if we really listen, listen very carefully, we too can hear the whisper: “You are my child, the beloved in whom I am well pleased.” Just like Jesus, through baptism we are named God’s own. In the liturgy as we make the sign of the cross on the baby’s forehead with a little blessed oil, we say, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.” In a world where even some of our most sacred rituals are only as lasting as the first big fight, this one, baptism, is truly a once in a lifetime proposition. Though we spend the rest of our lives attempting to grasp what it means to be the beloved of God, even sometimes being unable to believe that God *is*, much less that God loves us, baptism is forever; it always “takes” the first time and never has to be repeated.

We are people who need so desperately to hear these words—not just to keep us from shooting one another in public places, but to fill the gaping hole that resides near the center of so many of us, people who look perfect, like we are on top of the world, but on the inside feel that we are alone, that we do not truly belong to anything and that if those even in our inner circle really knew us, they’d probably kick us out. Baptism for us as Christians is a step—in most cases a very early step but sometimes an adult step—along the way to teach us that even when messages to the contrary surround us—and they *will* from time to time surround us loudly—at our core we too are the beloved of God, that we belong.

At the bottom of arrogance and hyper-criticism, just below the surface of snobbishness and meanness, in every case, I would argue, there is a person who deeply, even desperately, fears that he/she really does not belong. No collection of degrees or accomplishments or club memberships can ever give the kind of belonging that God offers: You are my beloved. That is the kind of belonging these children are receiving today.

Is there a catch? Yes, I think there is. It is that when we know that we are loved like that, life is radically different. Love like that changes us forever. We engage a challenging ethic: goodness, patience, kindness, mercy, justice. These become the bywords of our lives. When Jesus arose from the waters, he was no longer just a nice Jewish carpenter from Nazareth. He was on his way—on his way to being all that God had created him to be.

And so it is for us. Our immersion in the truth of God’s love for us changes us. It sets us on a journey, a journey fueled by the most extraordinary words ever heard that tell us who we are: “You are my beloved.” We don’t know it or remember it every moment, but without it, we are nothing; and with it we can face all that comes to us.

In the name of God: *Amen.*