

Epiphany 1C'19 (The Baptism of Our Lord)  
13 January 2019  
Is.43.1-7; Ps.29; Acts 8.14-17; Lk.3.15-17;21-22  
St. Luke's Episcopal Church  
North Little Rock, Arkansas  
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*Grant us grace, O Lord that we might perceive and know ourselves to be your beloved Sons and daughters and then follow in your steps by building a community of Love and sharing the Good News with those all around us, through Christ your beloved. Amen.*

As most of you know I am a big Downton Abbey fan and I'm so excited about the new movie they are currently shooting and is set to be released in theatres this fall! In preparation for the movie I have been going back and watching the DVDs of the TV series. The other evening, I happened to watch the episode from the final season where Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes were married. The wedding takes place in the village church, and the producers perfectly followed all the details of a real Anglican wedding, including the use of *The Book of Common Prayer* for the liturgy.

I was reminded that at every wedding for centuries the liturgy begins with just two words, "Dearly beloved," "Dearly beloved: *(and as it goes on to say) We have come together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony.*"

As the Christian community gathers to participate in the joining together of two people who love each other, the liturgy reminds us that this is a sacramental act that springs from the Author of Love, the God whose very Name is Love, in the midst of Christ's beloved community – the Church. It is here in the church that we are to be reminded of who we are – God's beloved sons and daughters.

If marriage is a sacramental act that is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace then Baptism is the sacrament where our journey into our true identity as God's beloved children is activated. In today's gospel reading we see that what is true for Jesus is true of us. As he came to earth in human form, he had to take up the human journey. What Jesus' baptism reveals to Jesus and to the world is that our true identity is centered in our relationship to God, and from this identity all of our tasks should flow. At his baptism God declares to Jesus: "You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." God declares the truth of what is already true - that Jesus can receive and live into his truest and best self!

For this reason, when you enter into the nave of an Episcopal Church the first piece of furniture you are likely to encounter is the baptismal font. This is the liquid portal by which we enter and are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. Our true identity is a gift to be received not an accolade to be earned – there is nothing in fact that we can ever do to earn or deserve it – it is freely given through the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus reveals how important it is for us to claim our true identity because his would be sorely tested in the wilderness of temptation which immediately followed his baptism. On the heels of his baptism and after hearing the very voice of God declare him to be the beloved, he is led toward temptations that basically attempt to give him amnesia, that he might forget that he is God's beloved – he doesn't have to try and earn it or to prove it as the devil tempts him to try and do. What has been so powerfully declared by God is what the devil so opposes and hits him the hardest with, "*If you are the Son of God then turn these stones into bread? If you are the Son of God then jump off this mountain and God's angels won't let you hit the ground...*"

Like Jesus we will be invited on our journeys to forget the truth about who we really are and we'll be tempted to climb back onto a treadmill of fear as we are invited to reject ourselves into believing that we are not worthy of God's unconditional love or for that matter, anyone else's. If we listen to these dark voices long enough, we may come to doubt ourselves, to constantly have to keep up appearances in order to counter them, and end up despising ourselves.

I think it's important to point out that there is a distinction between God's unconditional love and God's unconditional approval. Henri Nouwen pointed out that, "*God does love us without conditions but does not approve of every human behavior. God doesn't approve of hatred, betrayal, [gratuitous] violence,*"<sup>1</sup> or any number of other behaviors that violates the love of God.

This is why at all services of Holy Baptism and on this day when we remember Jesus' baptism, we also recite together what the church calls "The Baptismal Covenant." Because we are the beloved of God our lives should reflect that of a follower of Christ. While the first part of the baptismal covenant lays out the basis for orthodox Christian belief, the second part spells out what a life as the beloved of God looks like on the ground: 1) We promise to continue in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles and in the breaking of bread, and the prayers. 2) We resist evil and when we fall short, we repent and return to God and God's ways. 3) In our words and by our deeds we proclaim the Good News that we are the beloved of God. 4) We will seek and serve Christ in all persons and love our neighbors as ourselves 5) We will strive for justice

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<sup>1</sup> Nouwen, Henri, *The Only Necessary Thing, Living a Prayerful Life* (Crossroad Publishing: New York, 1999) pp.67-68

and peace for all and will respect the dignity of every human being. This is what Christian faith in action looks like.

To all of these we answer, “I will with God’s help.”

There is a story about Queen Elizabeth II that illustrates the power of living into our true identity. When she was a young princess of about seven, she reportedly had been trying the patience of the governess by running amok all over the palace, throwing things in the floor and jumping up and down on the royal sofa. The governess walked over to her and sat down on the sofa next to her and asked her a question in a commanding voice: “*Elizabeth, Elizabeth, do you know who you are?*” Elizabeth looked back at her with a puzzled look but gave no answer. The governess answered her own question by saying, “*Elizabeth do you realize that you are the next Queen of England?*” Elizabeth, sat up straight, squared her shoulders, and said with a strong and clear voice, “*Well I had better start acting like it.*” From that day forward, she never jumped up and down on the royal furniture again.

In a moment we will join together in saying the full covenant and my prayer is that we will see it as an invitation to return, to begin once again to live according to our true identities as a beloved son and a beloved daughter, to love God, to love ourselves, and to love our neighbors.

‘Dearly beloved:’ May St. Luke’s remember that is in fact who we truly are and may we remember our mission and once again take back up our primary task - to know Christ and to make Christ known. Amen.