

Baptism Sermon, Shaun and Preston Rivera October 17, 2021

Mark 1:9-11

Jesus... was baptized by John in the Jordan [River]. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

One of my favorite movies is the Disney animated film, *The Lion King*. It is a good story, and it has some wonderful music. But what really sends shivers down my spine is the way it so powerfully depicts the meaning of Baptism.

Many of you have seen the film, I'm sure. You will remember that Mufasa is the Lion King who rules his animal kingdom with wisdom and kindness. But Mufasa's younger brother, Scar, is jealous that Mufasa's infant son, Simba, will inherit the throne rather than Scar. So Scar arranges a stampede. Mufasa the king is killed, Scar takes the throne, and the young Simba runs away to a faraway land – where he learns the ways and attitudes of those animals who inhabit that land.

Meanwhile, back in his homeland, Scar has become a ruthless ruler of Mufasa's old kingdom, and soon the kingdom becomes a wasteland. A childhood friend of Simba escapes the kingdom and runs to seek help from whatever source she can find. Searching far and wide, she runs into Simba, and wants him to return to live out his destiny as the true Lion King. Simba, however, has become very attached to – and identified with – the way of life in this faraway land that he has adopted; and he refuses to return. But in the pivotal scene of the movie, Rafiki, the baboon priest, takes Simba to a pond, stirs the pond, and asks Simba to look into the water. Simba does; but rather than seeing a reflection in the water of himself, he sees in the water instead the image of his father Mufasa. The message is clear: Simba **is** the King's son – *that* is his TRUE identity. His calling is to *live out* that true identity, in the spirit of his father, for the sake of his kingdom.

He is faced with a choice. Will he choose to accept his **true** identity as son of the King, with all the responsibilities that go along with it? Or will he choose to identify with the culture and mindset he has learned and imbibed in that faraway land, and has taken as his own?

My friends, the baptismal waters reflect for *us* **our** true identity as sons and daughters of God, our Father, in whose image and likeness we were created (Genesis 1:26). The words from heaven spoken to Jesus at **his** baptism are spoken *today* to Shaun and Preston, and to each of *us*, also. "You are my son, my daughter, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And notice that God says this to Jesus **before** Jesus has even started his ministry! God is well-pleased with his son, and loves him; not because of anything he has done, but simply for who he is. It reminds me of that opening scene of *The Lion King*, where Mufasa stands on a high place and holds up for his whole kingdom to see his newborn son, Simba. Simba was beloved, and his father was well-pleased with him, delighted in him – even though Simba, only a baby, had not done a single deed to *merit* that delight. His father delighted in him simply because of who he was: his son.

And **we** are God's daughters and sons – that's what we claim and **proclaim** today as we celebrate Shaun and Preston's baptisms, and renew our own baptismal vows. And it challenges us! For, you see, I think we are often like Simba, who came to identify with the culture and mindset of that faraway land into which he had settled and had become immersed. It was *not* his **true** identity; yet he had come to *believe* that it **was**.

And, my friends, I think that you and I can easily fall into the same trap. For, our own culture can become almost like that faraway land in the film: *far* from the Kingdom of God as revealed by Jesus in his parables and other teachings, and exemplified in how he lived. The culture in which **we** live, and which we can so easily *identify* with (because we breathe its very air), is far away from the mindset and consciousness of **God's** Kingdom. Jesus teaches us that in God's Kingdom, we forgive one another 70 times 7 (Matt. 18:21-22); we turn the other cheek (Matt. 5:38-40); we love our enemies and do good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27); we become servants of all (Mark 9:35). But when was the last time we took those teachings of Jesus *seriously*, living out of our **true** identity as daughters or sons of God, citizens of God's Kingdom? More often, I'm afraid, we tend to live out of *false*, **cultural** identities which are **not** forgiving, **not** loving, **not** serving, and which only further *divide* us daughters and sons of God from one another.

And that's the second Baptismal image I see in *The Lion King*: Yes, Simba claimed his **true** identity as an *individual*; but in doing so, he was also *reconnecting* with his community, his kingdom, and accepting community responsibilities – responsibilities to all the inhabitants of his Father's Kingdom. He would use his power and authority for *their* sake, just as his Father had done.

In Holy Baptism, **we** are initiated into a community comprising our fellow daughters and sons of God – the Communion of Saints, the Church has called it; all who **are** living, all who **have** lived, and all who **will** live. Contrary to the *polarizing* nature of many of the groups with which some people identify themselves today – separated by political party, or race, or nationality, or one's attitude toward vaccines, or whatever – contrary to these contentious groups formed by division, the Communion of Saints is One. Each one of us is a part of the Body of Christ, and, as St. Paul said, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't

need you!” (1 Cor. 12:21, NIV) Our true identity is not just as sons and daughter so God, but as siblings to one another.

This Baptismal service **began** with an excerpt from St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians, which speaks of our oneness in the Body of Christ, the Communion of saints:

“There is **one** Body and **one** Spirit; **one** hope in God’s call to us; **One** Lord, **one** Faith, **one** Baptism; **One** God and Father of **all**, who is above **all** and through **all** and in **all**.” (Eph 4:4-6, NRSV)

It’s impossible to escape the drumbeat of those two words in that short passage: “One” and “All.” Black **and** White, English-speaking **and** Spanish-speaking, Americans **and** Iranians, gay **and** straight, Republican **and** Democrat, old **and** young – these are *diversities* to celebrate, not opposing *identities* to separate us from one another. Our true identity is *who we are in God*: beloved daughters and sons, with whom our heavenly Father is well-pleased. And, like Simba, when we choose our True Identity over all the false ones our divisive culture offers, we find we belong to a community in which we are called to take our part, and for which we all share responsibility: the Communion of Saints, comprising all of God’s children who have ever lived or ever will live, one unbroken line down through the ages. We see it here in the three generations represented in this one beautiful family. And we all sit in the same pews in which people have sat for almost 120 years: a continuous, unifying flow of faith and prayer and spirit and love passed down through time, generation to generation.

The Lion King movie begins with Mufasa, the Lion King, holding his newborn son, Simba, high for everyone to see. And it ends with Simba, the *new* Lion King, holding **his** newborn child high for all to see. And if Mufasa or Simba had said anything to their newborns at that moment of holding them up for their entire Kingdom to see, beaming with joy, I have to think they might well have said, “You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” It is their **true** identity; *and* it is ours.

AMEN