

Epiphany 1B 2021 Sermon

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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."

On the Sunday before Christmas, we read the story about the Angel Gabriel appearing to a young woman named Mary and saying to her, "Greetings, **favored** one! The Lord is with you." In my sermon that day, I quoted 17th-Century poet Angelus Silesius, who said, "What does it profit me if Gabriel hails the **Virgin**, unless he brings *to me* the very selfsame tidings?" In other words, the Angel Gabriel proclaims his message, not *just* to Mary, but to each of **us**: *We* are God's favored ones, also. The Lord is with **us**, and *we* are being called to give birth to Christ in our own souls.

On Christmas Eve, we read of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, and I quoted 14th Century Friar Meister Eckhart, who said, "What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son [in Bethlehem] if *I* do not **also** give birth to him in **my** time and culture?"

The characters in the Gospels are not just people who lived 2000 years ago; they are *us*: you, and I. What is said to *them*, and what happens with *them*, is said to *us* and happens with *us*.

We see this dynamic in **today's** story about Jesus' baptism. Just as Jesus participates in John's baptism of repentance, and just as God's voice from heaven assures him, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased;" so we, too, are to participate in a baptism of repentance, and God assures **us** that *we*, too, are God's beloved children.

"You are my child, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." David Lose notes that "It's these words that start Jesus' ministry. These words that equip him to deal with temptation. These words that orient his mission and anchor his ministry. These words that give him an unassailable identity that makes... everything else possible.

“And the same **can** be true of us,” Dr. Lose continues. “I *would* write ‘is’ true [of us], except that baptism is one of those things that has both an **objective and subjective** quality. **Objectively**, we are *absolutely* God’s beloved child; this is the promise of Baptism. But **subjectively**, we may or may not **know** that, may or may not believe that, may or may not even think of that...”¹ May or may not **act from** that inner place in our soul where our True, Divinely-beloved Self resides.

In these past few days, following the assault on our nation’s Capitol Building, the question, “Who are we, really?” has been asked more than once. And we have heard two disparate answers. On the one hand, we have heard people say, “This rioting (or insurrection, or whatever we call it) is **not** who we are!” [INSERT FIRST FILM CLIP]²

On the other hand, we have heard people say about the assault, “Unfortunately, this **is** who we are.” [INSERT SECOND FILM CLIP]³

My friends, I think **both** of these things are true.

Objectively, we are **not**, at our core, the kind of people we saw reflected in those disturbing and deadly actions perpetrated at our nation’s Capitol Building. Those kinds of riotous and violent actions do not arise from that deep place within us which harbors our True Identity as God’s beloved children with whom God is well-pleased; that identity which reflects the mind of Christ and the love of Christ. Those violent and destructive actions we saw on Wednesday – on the Feast of the Epiphany – do **not** reflect the meaning of our baptism: that we have been plunged beneath the baptismal waters, dying to our identification with sin and our False Selves, and rising to resurrected life with, and in, Christ.

On the other hand, **subjectively**, we **are**, at least part of the time, those people whom we saw on our television screens. At times, we have chosen to identify with that part of ourselves which is **not** of God. We have chosen to identify with the *worst* part of our nation’s governmental system, have chosen to believe that our truest identity is to be found in partisan divisiveness and polarization, self-righteousness, and hatred of those who belong to the “other” political party (or the “traitors” in our own party). My friends, I think this is the reason that so many of us recoiled so strongly from what we saw on Wednesday: Our nation’s Capitol Building stands for all that is **best** in our government; and it was being blatantly attacked by all that is worst. And I think it was a wake-up call for many of us, Democrat or Republican. On Wednesday, we were all confronted with the realization that for far too long we have hitched our very identities to a distorted, divisive, and destructive partisanship.

It is past time, my friends, to do what John the Baptist calls us to do: to admit where we are wrong, and repent. In analyzing Wednesday’s attack, one secular reporter remarkably mentioned that we must confess our “sins.” [INSERT VIDEO CLIP]⁴

“We can only realize our strengths if we stop whitewashing our sins.”

Fr. John Shea notes that “John [the Baptist's] primary work is freeing people from their identification with sin.”⁵ Our identification with that which **separates** us from God and from each other.

Look again at the videos of the assault on the Capitol Building, and you will see that people are carrying and waving symbols of whatever ideologies, political leaders, conspiracy theories, or allegiances have *become* their identity and have come to define who they are (and who they are against – which is a huge part of their identity). But all these fiercely-claimed identities are, in the end, idolatrous; for they displace our deepest and truest identity as “beloved child of God” among all the other “beloved children of God” on the face of God’s earth. That member of the Capitol Police who was hit in the head with a fire extinguisher, and died? A beloved child of God. That woman who was killed by a bullet fired from the gun of a member of the Capitol Police? A beloved child of God. The member of the Police who fired that shot? A beloved child of God. That politician whom we can’t even stand to look at on television? A beloved child of God.

On this Feast Day of the Baptism of Jesus, our Gospel story calls us back to that which is our **deepest** and truest *identity*: beloved children of God, sister and brother to one another. There is much in our lives that can **describe** us: our occupation, our race and ethnicity, our gender and sexuality, our life experiences both good and bad, our passions and interests and commitments to various political parties, groups, what have you. All of these, and much more, can *describe* us. But they don’t **define** us.

Today, one of our 4 major Baptismal Feast Days, we have the opportunity to renew our own baptismal vows. As we do so, may we hear those words spoken to **us** that were spoken to Jesus at *his* baptism: “You are my child, the beloved.” Those words speak *objective* truth, tell us who we **truly** are, identify our **True** Self at the core of our being. In this sense, those who stated that the assault on our nation’s Capitol Building was “not who we are” are correct. People who act from their deep identity as beloved children of God do not act in such a manner.

And yet, the continual pull of our ego is to identify with that which is out there, in the world: those powerful personalities, partisan groups, allegiances, ideologies, conspiracies which call out to us, “**This** is who you are.” And subjectively, there is truth in that statement, also. For who among us has not succumbed, at one time or another, to those siren voices from the world calling us to identify with our lesser self, identify with our sin? At times, *subjectively*, we may not be as different from Wednesdays’ “mob” as we would like to think.

And so, as we reflect on our baptism and renew our baptismal vows today, let us honestly ask ourselves: Which voice do we listen to? The siren voices of this world? or the voice from heaven, telling us that we are God's beloved child?

AMEN

1 David Lose, "A Bigger Baptism" http://www.davidlose.net/2021/01/baptism-of-our-lord-b-a-bigger-baptism/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+DavidLose%2FIsqE+%28...In+the+Meantime%29

2 "Stop Pretending 'This Is Not Who We Are'", by Lindsay Crouse, Adam Westbrook, and Sanya Dosani, *New York Times video*, January 8, 2021
<https://nyti.ms/39bnZWJ>

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 25