

Beloved Children of God (A Sermon for Epiphany 2B, 2018)

St. Mary's Episcopal Church (Cypress, Texas)

Mark 1:4-11

January 7, 2018

Take a moment to remember the last baptism you witnessed. Perhaps you can recall the proud parents and godparents, dressed in their Sunday best, standing around the baptismal font. In their arms they hold their young, freshly-bathed child, hoping that she won't create a fuss. Before them stands the minister or priest, neatly dressed in suit and tie, or robe, or colorful vestments. The font stands ready. The congregation looks on with curiosity and pleasure, wondering how the child will respond to what is about to happen. The atmosphere is peaceful and serene. It is a family occasion, a beautiful moment that will long be remembered.

Not quite like the baptism we've just read about. There, a wild man "clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist," (1) who lives in the desert and survives on "locusts and wild honey," (2) stands waist-deep in a muddy river, as men and women wade out to meet him and to receive his "baptism of repentance." They've come a long way to see him and to hear his fiery rhetoric; they needed to see if what people said about him was true. You wouldn't call this atmosphere peaceful and serene.

It feels risky, perhaps even dangerous. Everyone knows that the unkempt prophet is openly challenging the authority of the temple priests, who claim to be the sole mediators of God's forgiveness. He has no institutional standing. Rather, he's an anti-establishment figure, a threat to those in power, sparking a revolution of renewal in anticipation of the One for whom all Israel waits with expectation. Authorities from Jerusalem have been out to visit him; not to seek

repentance, but to challenge and test him. The king hates him, because he's not afraid to speak his mind.

The gospel writer describes the scene, as the as-yet-unknown Jesus of Nazareth offers himself to be baptized: "Just as he was coming up out of the water," he tells us, "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.'"

As different as these two scenes might appear, there is deep meaning that binds them together. For Jesus, and for the gospel writers who record his story, this is a moment of profound significance. It is here, in the muddy waters of the Jordan, that his true identity is revealed and his authority established. The voice from heaven testifies that he is God's Son, the Beloved, with whom God is "well pleased." These words will continue to echo within him in the weeks and months to come, as he seeks to carry out God's will.

For those of us that have been baptized, this has also been a moment of profound significance. It is here, in the waters of baptism, that our true identity is affirmed as well. We, too, are beloved children of God in whom the Father is well pleased. In this sacrament, we are united with Christ and receive a new identity. From this moment on, we are Christians, chosen and loved by God and a member of Christ's Body, the Church. No person or circumstance can ever take this identity away from her. We have been "sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever."

For Jesus, and for us, there is great freedom in this new identity. We are free to seek and to do God's will, without thought of whether the world deems us important or successful.

External indicators of success – wealth, social status, educational or work-related achievements, power, and privilege – do not define us. Our identity lies in our relationship with God, who has claimed us to be his own. We need not strive for the approval and recognition of others. Our sole purpose is to do the will of the One we call “Father,” to become the people we were created to be, to be faithful to the mission which we have been given in life.

It was so for Jesus, and it is so for you and for me.

And above all else, we belong to God.

*Amen.*