

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD
Year B
January 8, 2012
Mark 1:4-11
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Who are you? Who are you, really? Who are you, deep down inside? That's the first question I want to ask this morning. And the second question is, What difference does any of this make? Why does any of this matter? We just went through the season of Christmas, and a great deal of energy and effort went into all our activities. What difference does Christmas make? Why does it matter?

I am going to appeal to three friends to answer those two questions this morning. My wife, Lynn, and I recently saw the movie *The Way*, starring Martin Sheen, who plays a father whose son is killed in the Pyrenees in France, just as he is embarking on a 500-mile pilgrimage. The father goes to France to retrieve his son's body, and, while there, decides to do the pilgrimage on behalf of his son, spreading his son's ashes as he goes. The father is joined by three fellow travelers.

Today we're joined by three fellow travelers. One is a Lutheran pastor, formerly a professional trombone player with the New York Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony, and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. Another is a former colleague, a former youth director at a Lutheran Church, who now works for Habitat for Humanity. The other is a wise sage, now deceased, who has accompanied millions on their journey of life through his writing. I begin with the last, Henri Nouwen.

Who are you?

I traveled to California last week to visit our daughter. I encountered many new people along the way, going and coming, as well as during my week there. Whenever I meet someone for the first time, if we get past the "Where are you from?" question, one of the next questions is invariably "What do you do?"

I wonder if we define the question "Who are you?" with "What do you do?"

Or I wonder if we answer the question "Who am I?" by saying "I am what other people say about me." We might feel good about ourselves when others say good things about us. But what happens when what others might say about us is not so good? Consider all the bullying going on among our young people. Many people, especially the young and vulnerable, are thrown into the depths of despair when others say negative things about them. Many commit suicide. If we answer the question "Who am I?" by what others say about us, then we are held hostage by others.

Or we might answer the question “Who am I?” by saying “I am what I have.” We live in a culture that says to us constantly, “Buy, buy, buy.” Our economy is deemed healthy when consumers buy, buy, buy. The irony is that when we answer the question “Who am I?” with “I am what I have,” the economy may be healthy, but our souls, our spirits, are sick, sick unto death.

Henri Nouwen, the first of our fellow travelers, invites us to consider the answer to the question “Who am I?” by saying “You are God’s Beloved!” Nouwen goes on:

I hope that you can hear these words as spoken to you with all the tenderness and force that love can hold. My only desire is to make these words reverberate in every corner of your being—“You are the Beloved!”

The voice that speaks from above and from within [in the baptism of Jesus and in our own baptism] whispers softly or declares loudly: “You are my Beloved son or daughter, on you my favor rests.” It certainly is not easy to hear that voice in a world filled with voices that shout: “You are no good; you are ugly; you are worthless; you are despicable; you are nobody unless you can demonstrate the opposite.”¹

“You are God’s Beloved!”

Let’s turn to our second question: What difference does any of this make? Why does any of this matter? And to help us answer that question I appeal to our second traveling companion, the Lutheran pastor, the musician, my friend from seminary.

He opens his Christmas letter quoting a new Advent hymn:

We are called to ponder myst’ry and await the coming Christ,
To embody God’s compassion for each fragile human life.
God is with us in our longing to bring healing to the earth,
While we watch with joy and wonder for the promised Savior’s birth.
(Evangelical Lutheran Worship #258)

Then my friend writes: “These words strike me because they are words that describe life, even in ordinary days.”

First there is so much mystery: Why have we celebrated the Resurrection in the lives of two women of our church this year—one 54 years old, and one 106? Why does long life and good health come to some and not to others?

We are called to embody compassion. . . . God is with us in our longing for healing. Whether it is the healing of the earth in the face of droughts and floods, hurricanes and blizzards, the healing of nations, or the healing of the sick and dying, we all long for healing.

What difference does any of this make? Why does any of this matter?

My friend might answer that question by saying, “We are called to compassion.”

Now I appeal finally to our third traveling companion, a former colleague in ministry, a former youth director, a woman who has gone on camping trips into the Boundary Waters Wilderness Canoe Area with my family four times (and one gets to know another person quite well in the highs and lows of such experiences).

She writes in her Christmas letter:

I recently was visiting a church and the pastor gave a grand sermon about Christmas. He preached about a God who became flesh and dwelt among us; about the God who came to us in the form of an infant; the God who became present in the lowly dwelling of a stable. As he kept preaching I couldn't help but think—yes, I've heard this before . . . but what does it matter? I was reflecting on an experience I had the week before when I sat with parents who had lost their young adult son (a kid who was in my youth group . . .). The parents cried out, “Why did God take my son?” Hearing from this pastor about the miracle of Christmas did not seem relevant in the life of this family. I was reminded of a quote from my youth ministry days by Kendra Creasy Dean, “Believing in God is not the issue; believing God *matters* is the issue.”

It seems at Christmas we're trying to convince ourselves (and one another) that Jesus is true—and that Jesus really is the gift of Christmas. But, believing in Jesus is not the issue—most of us would say we believe in Jesus. We need to be convinced that Jesus makes a difference in our lives. We need—we yearn—to believe that Jesus, the infant, the God who became flesh—actually matters. **John 1:5 says, “A light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”** It doesn't say, “There shall be *no* darkness.” I love this verse because it acknowledges that there will be darkness in our lives. There will be sadness, despair, hopelessness, separation—BUT, the light of Jesus does overcome it. We are not swallowed up by the darkness! The light of Jesus (and Christmas is just a reminder) can gently crawl into our souls. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not take over! God simply will not let the darkness of the world take over. . . .

Who are you? What does any of this matter? On this Sunday of the Baptism of Our Lord, may the ears of your heart be open to hear the voice of God speak to you, whether in a whisper or in a shout, “You are my beloved child. In you I am well pleased!”

Thanks be to God!

¹Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Direction: Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006), 29.