

“Being Beloved”

January 8, 2012

Scripture: Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11

Whenever I hear this story of Jesus’ baptism I’m reminded of a scene from the movie “The Lion King.” You might remember that the cub, Simba, ran away from home because he believed he was responsible for his father, Mufasa’s, death. So Simba grows up in the wilderness, cut off from his pride. But when he becomes an adult lion an ape, who is the sort of priest for the pride, literally catches wind of him and finds him. He tells Simba that his father is not dead and that he can take Simba to Mufasa. So they take off on a strange run through the jungle and underbrush and over obstacles until the ape brings him to a pool and points down and says, “There is your father.” Simba looks in the pool and only sees his own reflection, but the ape tells him to look closer, and when he does he sees his father’s image in himself.

Well, this confuses Simba. He doesn’t know what he should do. He knows he’s supposed to be lead the pride, but he doesn’t feel adequate and wants to run away from it all. And as he’s mulling all this over at night beneath a starry sky, he looks up and the stars form the figure of his father who says to him, “Simba, remember who you are!”

Now I realize that’s not exactly like the story in Mark, but what I think is at the heart of that story is this moment when Jesus realizes who he is. Mark’s Gospel is unique in that no one else hears or sees what Jesus does. Not even John seems to know who he is. To the rest of the world Jesus is just another pilgrim come looking for forgiveness. So this is a story about Jesus discovering his true identity, one he didn’t even know until he had gone through the waters of baptism: “You are my Son; the Beloved.”

Why is that so important? Why do all the gospel writers, even John, use this event, this time when John is baptizing to identify Jesus? I don’t think there’s any question that Jesus was baptized along with everyone else. The reason I say that is because it’s so obviously embarrassing. Mark just tells about it straight out. But the other gospel writers sort of hem and haw about it. Matthew has John sort of trying to deflect him; Luke glosses over it barely giving it any notice at all. John doesn’t even mention it. Its significance I think lies in Jesus’ feeling compelled to join the crowd and identify with the lowly. When we talk about the incarnation we usually are talking about Jesus’ birth, especially this time of year, but the incarnation isn’t truly complete until Jesus steps into the water. There’s an old spiritual that goes:

It’s a me, it’s a me, it’s a me, O Lord

Standin’ in the need of prayer!

It’s a me, it’s a me, it’s a me, O Lord,

Standin’ in the need of prayer!

Not my father, not my mother, but it’s me, O Lord,

Standin’ in the need of prayer!

Not my brother, not my sister, but it’s me, O Lord,

Standin’ in the need of prayer!

Only when Jesus takes his place alongside us, stands in the need of prayer, is the incarnation complete. And at that moment God claims him as Beloved.

We talk about Jesus being fully human and fully divine as a matter of doctrine. It's one of those things we say assuming everyone knows what we mean. But too often we say it without really thinking about it much ourselves. To be "fully human" means standing in the waters of baptism seeking forgiveness, seeking a way back into relationship with God; to be "fully divine" means being God's own Beloved.

And so Jesus walks along this border: identifying with us completely while revealing to us the presence of God. And he invites us to join him. He invites us to walk this narrow path that embraces our full humanity, the humility of always standing in the need of prayer, while being fully aware of God's presence in our lives and in the world.

But it is a narrow path. I don't mean that in a moralistic way. What I mean is it's easy to wander off and become subsumed in the pain of the world, so much so that we become numb to it and callous. We forget who we are and alongside whom we're called to walk. In Luke's Gospel Jesus tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man doesn't see Lazarus at his doorstep because he's forgotten himself; his sin isn't being rich, it's failing to see himself in the poor man Lazarus.

Ironically, moving off the path, away from awareness of God's presence, doesn't make us too human, it makes us less human. It's in listening for God's voice, in striving to see as God sees that we discover who we really are.

That's why our sacraments are so important. We remember our baptism because it's through those waters that we step onto the path that Jesus walks, the path he began at his baptism. By identifying with Christ in baptism we embrace our full humanity that can only be realized in the presence of God. And in celebrating communion we're brought into relationship with a God whose love for us will risk even death itself to enfold us. For the sake of God's own Beloved at this table we discover that we are beloved.

At the Jordan Jesus steps into a world filled with oppression, sadness and pain, a world that by all rights ought to be reviled and rejected. But rather than bring a message of vengeance and hate, he brings light. He brings compassion. He brings love. God's answer to our suffering is to come nearer, to speak to us softer, to hold us closer and in Christ to claim us as God's own.

Amen