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A Dialogue Sermon on Baptized Identity

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Isaiah 42:1, 5-7, 9; Mark 1:4-13

Sam:

In theater rehearsals there is a time set aside for the director to give the actors notes on their performances. In my experience, the nature of notes can vary wildly from the finely technical, “before you say that line take half a step to your right, look over your shoulder, wait three beats, then speak the line through gritted teeth. Oh, and can you make it funny?” Then there are the more evocative notes, “Sam, you must be more like an onion.” And, of course, the only acceptable response to a note is, “Yes. Here I am. Send me!” “So help me God, I will be more like an onion, whatever that means!”

Every actor I know could dish with you about some seemingly ridiculous, verbose, or incomprehensible note they have received. And as cathartic as such processing can be, I am actually going to share a positive experience of receiving notes. Carl Flink is a choreographer in town. He has a wonderfully economical and empowering way of

checking in after notes. After giving a note he asks, “Do you have enough information?” Not “Do you understand?” “Do you have enough information?” Essentially, are you sufficiently equipped to seek understanding through your performance? Do you feel adequately prepared to publicly make sense of a mystery? Do you have enough of the essence to fill in the gaps with your imagination?

Such an approach reminds me of the life of faith, of following Christ. As the apostle Paul urges, “Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.” Similar to theater, trying to follow Jesus and faithfully interpret scripture’s mysteries requires imagination as much as comprehension. When the Spirit descends on us it is like a flood of imagination sending us in an unexpected direction. So, what information do we need to prepare for this spiritual deluge? We need to know that, like Jesus, we are a beloved child of God. And that, my siblings in Christ, is enough information to go on.

When we remember Jesus’ baptism, we also remember our own baptism, our mysterious and jarring initiation into the Christian tradition, our ordination into the priesthood of all believers. For many of us this most pivotal event in our faith journey occurred without our

knowledge and, almost certainly, without our understanding.

Tim:

A chance encounter I had 35 years ago that lasted only a few minutes has stuck with me. I was in Indonesia, traveling by myself across the island of Java where I had gone to represent the PC(USA) at a national gathering of the Christian Churches of Indonesia. That land is the largest Muslim nation in the world, and relations between Christians and Muslims are at best fragile.

A few hours outside Jakarta the bus stopped in a town, and I took a walk to a church building we had just passed. As I approached the door, a man opened it and greeted me in simple English. Then he asked me a question: “Are you baptized?”

I had never been asked that before. Are you baptized? Until that moment I had never thought of my baptism as an identity, but to him it was an important part of who I was. He didn't ask if I were from the U.S. or Australia. He wanted to know my religious commitment in order to understand something significant about who I was. Baptism was for him a crystal-clear marker of my identity.

In contrast, I realized in that moment, I had always taken it for granted.

I answered, “Yes,” and he smiled and welcomed me into the church. I wondered later if I had said “No,” would he still have shown such hospitality, and I concluded he would have. He just wanted to know if I were family. Baptism is a familial identity. When we go to the font as a baby, the minister asks our parents, “What is the Christian name of this child?” At the font we already know the family name – we are all beloved children of the one God, all members of the one Christian family.

If the man at that Indonesian church had asked a second question, “What is your Christian name?” I would have responded as my mother did way back at that church in Ellsworth, Kansas, in 1953, with my dad presiding at the font: “Timothy Dunkin.” My baptized identity: a beloved child of God.

Sam:

The action and information of Baptism can seem simple enough but the consequences of it are indeed mysterious and jarring. “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.' And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness."

And as much as we can't help but coo over a beatific baby patiently receiving the sacrament, we should be no less expectant of the infant who screams bloody murder at having her sin drowned out of her. I remember when our daughter was baptized. The font was a massive block of granite with a kind of river hewn through its middle. This river of heated water flows continually and is a lovely focal point in the sanctuary. Our daughter was baptized at the Easter Vigil. The service began at dusk and the baptism happened around 9. My wife and I decided that our daughter would be baptized naked, washed free of her sin just as she came into this world.

She was a champ as I held her throughout the service, long past her bedtime. I gently brought her back to consciousness and she looked so trustingly at me as we unwrapped her from her plush towel and lovingly deposited her in the softly flowing font. And then the heavens were torn asunder by her ear-splitting scream. Unbeknownst to us, the waters of the font are only warmed Sunday morning and no one had thought to heat them up for the Saturday night service. But our daughter

survived the mysterious and jarring sacrament and she WAS baptized. And when in her life she feels lost in the wilderness she can remember the most vital information she received at her baptism – her true identity as a beloved child of God. And that will be enough information.

Tim:

The baptism of our eldest daughter was similar. It was on Sunday, December 25, Christmas Day, 1988. There were four babies baptized that day. The senior pastor baptized the first three. Our six-month old was last, which was a shame because she began wailing in my arms as soon as the parents and babies went forward. Then the associate pastor, mother of the screaming baby I was holding, asked me, over the sounds of her first-born, “What is the Christian name of this child?” In that chaotic moment I remember thinking to myself, You know darn well what her name is; just take her, please. “Madeline,” I replied loudly, so as to be heard. Beth took Madeline and baptized her, as she kept up her full volume protest.

And then, following the custom of that church, Beth turned and lifted the newly baptized baby to show the congregation – and immediately the wailing ceased. She sat there in her mother’s arms, staring out at them, as if entranced at the sight of her new family. The other

minister broke the silence: “Some of us come kicking and screaming into the kingdom of God,” he said. “She just wanted to be introduced.”

Sam:

Of course, there will be times for our daughters, and for us, when we will crave more information to equip us for life’s mysteries. And in these moments, we can turn to the Spirit to stir our imaginations. Our theme for this year at Westminster is imagination and, my friends in Christ, there is no more vital tool in that leather toolbelt you carry around your waist in the wilderness than imagination. Prophets like John and Isaiah were people of imagination, imaginatively reinterpreting God’s story for God’s people. Both Isaiah and John demonstrate how to imagine a ministry in a wilderness.

When we are marked, like Jesus, in the waters of baptism and when we are driven by the Spirit it is guaranteed to be a wild ride. And it is only a matter of time before that wild ride leads us to a wilderness – to solitude, to temptation, to desolation. We are driven to these marginal places, these thresholds, not because we are being punished but because we have a ministry to live out and good news to proclaim in these wilderness places. John got to foretell Jesus’ coming from the wilderness. We get to retell it from

the wilderness. John ate locust and honey because that's what was available in his wilderness.

What sustains you in your wilderness? I know for me that coffee with a dear one is locust and wild honey to my bewildering despair. When friends have delivered us home-cooked meals it has been manna in the desert to us. What do you keep handy in the leather toolbelt you wrap around your waist? How do we meet people in their wildernesses? How do we be to them what the waiting angels were to Jesus in the wilderness? In their cancer diagnosis? In their unemployment? In the disintegration of their marriage? In John's case the wilderness where he partook of locust and honey and proclaimed a baptism of repentance was to be replaced with the wilderness of prison and execution. And Jesus, too, was always headed for the wilderness of the cross.

Tim:

We can imagine ourselves never fully drying off after our trip to the font, either as a child or an adult. In a few minutes we'll all be sprinkled by the pastors, and the water falling on us will remind us that we are still damp from that watery welcome.

Baptism is an identity we carry with us all our lives. Jesus did, too, through his time in the wilderness, through his ministry, right up to his crucifixion. The baptism of Jesus concludes with his death and resurrection. He goes down into the water and rises to new life. So do all of us. In memorial services we offer a prayer in which we give thanks for the life of the one "whose baptism is now complete in death." The grace of God pours out at the font and continually through our lives, and then overflows in a final, eternal welcome.

Baptism signals that our life as beloved children of God has begun - and then, we are works in progress, sometimes missing the mark and falling short of God's hopes for us, but never losing our identity as beloved children of God.

Sam:

How do we meet people in their wildernesses before it leads to death? This community has helped several neighbors out of the wilderness of Nicollet Mall and into stable housing. These neighbors had been reduced to sleeping outside on the grounds of the church but through the grace of God and the persistent support and imagination on the part of Westminster staff, these neighbors were able to enter programs designed to help them gain stability, experience recovery and, perhaps as Isaiah prophesied, emboldened to do “a new thing” with their lives.

Last November in Westminster Hall, thanks to the Westminster Performing Arts Series, we got to witness and affirm a voice crying out in the wilderness. As part of the 10,000 Voices Project a participant from Faribault Men’s Correctional Facility told his story. We’ll call him José. I had the honor of collecting stories from José and several of his fellow writers at Faribault Men’s Prison. The time I spent with the men, helping to summon out their stories, was revelatory. I heard many moving, beautiful, and funny stories.

I witnessed men minister to one another as old wounds were opened and new bonds were sealed. For many of

them faith language pervaded and informed their storytelling. José (child of God), with the help of a translator, shared the heart rending and perilous story of leaving his family in Fidel Castro's Cuba to seek opportunity in America. It was a dramatic story of loss and love and faithfulness. He, too, was driven into the wilderness. There were moments when he was "tempted by Satan"; when he "was with the wild beasts," (including alligators at Guantanamo Bay); and there were indeed moments when "the angels waited on him." Like Jesus, José was a refugee with a wilderness story. It is tragic to know that José relates his wilderness journey while imprisoned in another wilderness.

José's story is a stark reminder of the way the wildernesses of our lives can seem endless. And José's story also reminds us how to meet him in his wilderness, how to wait on him like angels – to affirm his spirit, to receive his story, and, most vitally, to remember his belovedness to God – the essential information he survives on. This essential information is enough to feed his imagination. And it is locust and wild honey.

Tim:

"Are you baptized?" It was a simple question asked of me long ago. What about you? Are you baptized? Our

response reminds us that we are beloved children of God, and calls to live out that promise our whole lives long.

Sam:

Siblings in Christ, do you have enough information? Do you know that you are a child of God and that there is nothing you can do to undo that? Do you know how well you please God there in the wilderness in your true baptismal identity? You are doing it. You are imagining God's story anew. You are making Isaiah's words fresh: "See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them." Just imagine!

Tim:

Thanks be to God. Amen.