

Theme: You are a beloved Child of God.

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Many thanks to our players for this morning’s skit – more about this in a little bit.

Six weeks ago, on January 7 (the 1st Sunday in our Epiphany season), I began a sermon by sharing an interview I had heard on a morning newscast (*News Broadcast – January 2, 2018*). The news anchor interviewed a man who had joined an “Alt-Right,” white supremacy group as a teenager and continued as a member for several years. He eventually got out of this extremist group and now works with youth to show them that there are better ways to find a meaningful life. The interviewer asked him directly why so many young people are attracted to extremist groups (we could include teen gangs, the Alt-Right, ISIS, etc.). He was very quick and clear in his response: there are THREE things, he said, that all people need:

- A. A Sense of Identity;
- B. A Sense of Belonging (community/relationships);
- C. And a Sense of Purpose.

This was why he had joined an Alt-right group: in that group he found an identity through which he could express his anger and frustration with life; he found a group where he felt he belonged; and he discovered a purpose in which he could act out his frustration and anger toward the world.

IDENTITY, BELONGING, AND PURPOSE: This struck a chord with me and so, in cooperation with our church Council and Worship Committee, we are undertaking a Lenten Preaching series that will focus on these three basic needs that all of us have, no matter how young or old we may be. Each Sunday will feature a chancel skit, usually funny and always entertaining, to serve as a springboard into the sermon focus for the day. So it’s a good time to invite a neighbor or friend to come with you – to “Come and See.” Though a thorough examination of these three basic needs requires a lifetime to explore adequately, we will focus at least two Sundays on each basic need. Also, an adult discussion will be offered at 9:00 a.m. the following Sunday morning to discuss the previous Sunday’s skit and sermon. So jot down your thoughts, questions, and reactions today; then bring those to a discussion next Sunday at 9:00 a.m. in the adult classroom of the education wing.

Today we begin with IDENTITY. The gospel reading this morning, taken from the assigned lectionary reading for this, the first Sunday of Lent, Year B, has much to say about identity. In this text from Mark, we find the most succinct rendition of the beginnings of Jesus’ ministry of any gospel. In just seven verses, Mark outlines three events in Jesus life near the beginning of his ministry. First, Jesus is **baptized** (vss. 9-11); second, he is driven into the **wilderness** where he is **tempted** by Satan (vss. 12-13); and third, he then returns to Galilee and **begins his public ministry** (vss. 14-15). There isn’t much detail about any of these three events but what details are given imply much!

Like the gospel writers Matthew and Luke, Mark tells us that Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. As Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit, like a dove, descends upon him, and he hears a voice saying, “**You Are My Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.**” God has just proclaimed Jesus’ identity to him very

clearly. In fact, Jesus' baptism is all about his identity. Jesus is God's Son, the Beloved! What an experience this must have been for Jesus. And we might now expect Jesus to be highly energized and raring to go forth in ministry. But that's not what happens! Though Jesus may have gained clarity about who he is as the beloved Son of God, we read in Mark that, instead of going off to start a successful ministry, the Spirit "**drove**" him into the wilderness.

The word "**drove**," as used by Mark is a very forceful verb in Greek. It implies compulsion, conveying that the experience is neither desirable nor necessarily sought after by Jesus. When we say that someone seems "driven," don't we mean that they seem compelled by some overpowering force – either from within or from without? That seems to be the case for Jesus – he is **driven**, compelled into the wilderness. And there, alone in the wilderness, Jesus must now wrestle with his proclaimed identity – with what it means to be the "Beloved Son" of God. As we then read, this time in the wilderness does not turn out to be an easy and restful time of quiet contemplation for Jesus. It turns into a forty day struggle!

Mark simply states that while Jesus is there in the wilderness, he is "*tempted by Satan.*" In the Greek text, the phrase, "tempted by Satan," is in the passive voice, which indicates that Jesus is the **subject**, not the **object**, of this temptation. What's the difference between being the "object" of something or the "subject" of something? "Object" implies someone or something else is acting upon us. "Subject" implies that we are the actor. In other words, in this text Jesus is the subject and therefore the actor – he has to grapple with his own stuff: his own desires; his own feelings; his own longings. Mark's gospel doesn't provide us with the details of the temptations as do Matthew and Luke in their accounts. But we saw these portrayed in the skit a few moments ago. As Wormwood said in the skit, "How are we gonna tempt Jesus away from his mission?" What might cause Jesus to ignore his true, God-given identity and turn from his God-given mission?

Jesus finds himself struggling with the same sorts of temptations with which all human beings struggle:

- The desire **for physical pleasure**:
If you're hungry, why not turn those stones into bread and go ahead and eat; you've certainly got the resources to do so if you're the Son of God. So why not eat if you're hungry?
- The desire **for status**:
Of course it's okay to want to be a "somebody." Just imagine the crowd's reaction if you throw yourself down from the high place and the angels "bear you up." It'll prove you're the Beloved Son of God and everyone will think you are wonderful. You'll become famous and popular – a star.
- The desire **for power**:
Worship me, says Satan, and I will give you the world to rule. Then you can do and have anything you want – no one can stop you.

Jesus has to choose whether he will live into his identity as God's Beloved Son and follow God's mission for his life, or yield to these very real temptations. He has to choose whether or not to make God's will his own – whether or not to follow God's plan or focus on his own desires, which can become the demons within.

Throughout Jesus' earthly ministry, his identity was expressed in many different ways by those who followed him and listened to him. He was known as "teacher," "rabbi," "miracle worker," "healer," "Emmanuel," "messiah," "prince of peace" – to name just a few. But I suspect Jesus himself would have seen those words spoken at his baptism as the more important revelation of his identity: *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* And I suspect he held on to those words as Satan's temptations threatened to undo him.

Like Jesus, we too have many aspects to our identity. Again, in the January 7th sermon, I suggested that everyone create an Epiphany Tree – something that would reveal or manifest your identity. The Epiphany tree would be like a Christmas tree, except instead of putting Christmas ornaments on it, you would hang ornaments in which each ornament depicts some aspect of your identity. What ornaments would you hang on such a tree: Teacher? . . . Husband? . . . Mother? . . . Musician? . . . Student? . . . Athlete? And what would you place on the top of the tree, the "crown jewel" so to speak, of your identity? Because what we put on the top reveals what we see to be the most important reflection of our identity. How sad and revealing that Nikolas Cruz, the Florida shooter of the deadly tragedy this past week, is reputed to have posted on a YouTube video: *"I'm going to be a professional school shooter."* What does this say about how this young man sees himself? What he saw to be the "crown jewel" of his identity? And then the actions that this identity led him to undertake?

When we are baptized, God says to each one of us: *You are my son, you are my daughter, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.* It is reported that when Martin Luther was tempted, he didn't battle temptation by saying, "I am a Christian" or "I believe;" he didn't name any of his professional titles like "professor" or "priest" or any of his roles like "father" or "church leader;" nor did he say, "I'm going to be a great Reformer and create a new church." He would simply say, *"I am baptized."*

I suspect that Jesus, when tested in the wilderness, also held onto his baptism and remembered the voice from heaven: *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* As with Jesus, our baptism empowers us with our true identity as a child of God. Our true identity is not something the world, or our work place, or our friends, or any sport's team can give us; instead, our true identity is God-given. And when we focus upon that identity, contemplate that identity, and live into that identity, we will discover more and more of who God created us to truly be. To be sure, we will all experience wilderness wanderings that seek to draw us away from our God-given identity and God's purpose for our lives, but we can trust God to provide for us during those wilderness experiences even as angels ministered to Jesus.

A closing personal story . . . While in college so many years ago, I took a Water Safety Instructor's (WSI) course so I could become a life guard the following summer and teach swimming. I'd been swimming from an early age, and I'd always been somewhat athletic, but my athletic prowess usually exhibited itself more in "sprinting" type activities than in sports requiring "endurance" – no long distance track or swimming marathons for me! The WSI course was taught in the college swimming pool, as it was winter in Minnesota, and I had no trouble with the course – that is, until the very end. That's when I learned that part of the final pool exam included a mile non-stop swim. I was petrified; a few laps was no problem, but a mile was something else again!

The day arrived and I almost decided to drop the course. It's amazing the thoughts and fears that engulf one at a time like that: Would I survive? Would I pass out and drown right there in the

middle of the pool? Worse, would I fail to make it and lie exhausted at pool-side in humiliation? The swim began. After a few laps, my legs and arms became very weary from the constant strokes. I began to feel exhausted and short of breath. In response, I initially began to fight the water – work harder, which, of course, only exhausted me more. Then, in a moment of pure enlightenment, the thought came to me: ***“Let the water hold you up.”*** What a novel idea – let the water hold me up! Instead of fighting the water, I began to focus more on the air in my lungs – the air that would keep me afloat. I relaxed; slowed the strokes to conserve energy, realizing that I didn’t have to break any speed records; I just had to go the distance, and let the water work for me, not against me. I made the distance and, in the process, lost my fear of distance swimming (although it’s still not one of my favorite activities to do).

When we find ourselves in a Wilderness and being tempted by Satan, we need to remember to focus on that which will hold us up and help us hold to our true identity – like Luther, to hold on to our baptismal identity: that we are a Beloved Child of God. And we too will then find that God’s angels are present, ready to buoy us up and keep us afloat.

So a suggestion for a Lenten practice in the coming weeks. When you begin to question who you are – that is, your identity – repeat the phrase: ***“I am a baptized and beloved child of God.”***

(Say it out loud with me right now: “I am a baptized and beloved child of God.”)

When you begin to feel overwhelmed, repeat to yourself: ***“I am a baptized and beloved child of God.”*** When you feel yourself tempted by something you know to be wrong, say to yourself, ***“I am a baptized and beloved child of God.”***

Make this a mantra to be repeated frequently throughout each day of Lent. And then experience the angels of God waiting on you even as they waited on Jesus. For you too are a Beloved son/daughter of God.