

Baptism of our Lord January 8 2023

Matthew 3:13-17

It's a common trope, isn't it. The search for identity. To find out who we are. We see it in Star Wars in Luke Skywalker and Rey. In countless other movies- The Princess Diaries, The Matrix and more. One of my favorite book series growing up was by Lloyd Alexander called the Chronicles of Prydain and a key element of the books was the search by the protagonist, Taran, to discover who he was.

While perhaps overused in literature and entertainment, the search for identity is essential to who we are, isn't it?

How much time do we spend in our lives, especially early in life, trying to figure out our identity? Our parents and older siblings begin that process for us. Giving us models of what it means to be human as we watch them live out their lives, interact with other people, with us. As we grow, other adults become those models as well- teachers, coaches, friends of our parents, pastors, other family members.

They tell us who we are: a Middleswarth, a boy, a girl. They tell us we are strong, brave, gifted, curious, artistic. As we grow we

begin to have other influences on our understanding of who we are. Our identity.

Media, our particular youth culture, begin to shape us. We dress, act, speak like those who we see as popular, or who we admire. We take identities on and off like clothes, trying on one and then another. Searching for what fits. Goth, nerd, jock, gamer. I remember a time in my pre-teen/early teen years where I tried to find my stride.

Some of us will spend the rest of our lives without ever really settling on that identity. On who we are. Or we will settle on an identity that others give us. Ones that, ultimately, are not life giving. I read of a pastor who shared at a retreat the name for himself he had heard since childhood, "Not Good Enough". For others it is things like "Fat", "Worthless", "Lazy", "Stupid".

But all of these are wrong. In fact, they are lies.

The truth of our identity is one we discover in baptism. This ritual washing in water, with the name of the Trinitarian God we worship proclaimed over us. A washing that links us irrevocably with Jesus, God's expression of love for us. And the identity we discover, is that we are God's beloved child, with whom God is well pleased.

The Rev. Dr. David Lose puts it this way, "Baptism grants us an unassailable identity ... Whereas so much else in our life describes us – our occupation, our race and ethnicity, our gender and sexuality, our life experiences both good and bad, our passions and interests and commitments – our status as God's beloved children defines us. It's not that these other things don't matter. They do! But it's that none of these things is as important as our identity as God's beloved child."

Those other things define the uniqueness of who we are, but our core identity- each and every one of us- is God's beloved child, with whom God is well pleased. We are named as gifted with unique skills and talents. We bear the name Created-In-The-Image-of-God! Each and every one of us.

And when we root our lives in that identity. Build the uniqueness of our lives from that starting point, we will find life fuller and more abundant than if we cast about on our own.

But other things come into our world and seek to define our identity. David Lose is right, all of those other things are important in describing us. But the minute we make our occupation, our gender, our passion, interest, experience our identity we lose sight of the great truth God shows us in baptism.

When other things become more important, when we identify politically as Trump's or Biden's, as Democrat or Republican, when we divide ourselves into camps of us and them, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. We cover over the truth of who we are and whose we are and dishonor the one who so loved the world and all who reside within it that he was willing to die so that we might live. We dishonor Jesus Christ, when we do that.

We have a challenge today, my friends. In our nation and in our church. The challenge is one of identity. Our own and that of those who live with us in this nation, this world, and who are part of this body of Christ that is the church.

Do we understand our identity as child of God, claimed by God through the waters of baptism? By those waters freed from the oppression of sin, death, and all the forces that seek to defy God. If so, then we are committed to seeing everyone else as made in the image of God and deserving of love and respect for that reason. As worthy of being listened to, cared about, attended to. If so, we are committed to keeping the 8th commandment and seeing what others do in the best possible light. We are committed to seeing others as God's beloved children, too.

Even when we don't want to. Even when we feel they don't deserve it. Even when they are different from us in those ways that describe who they are but do not define their identity.

Even when they or we screw things up royally. Do and say and believe things we find incomprehensible.

We are at a moment in history where a key question for the citizens of this country is, "Can you differ with another person on important issues and still see this person as someone who is striving for the best for this nation?" And for Christians the task and calling is even greater: "Can you see someone who differs from you on important issues as a fellow child of God?"

How we answer those questions, both individually and corporately will determine the course of our country and the church for decades to come.

It is a daunting and difficult task. Made even more so by sin, death, and all those forces that defy God. By the tribalism that we see so present in our own scriptures and that gets expressed in so many ways in our world- racism, classism, sexism, bigotry of all kinds, but which ultimately denies the divine image in the other. Which calls God a liar.

These forces are the ones that caused the rupture of our relationship with God in the first place. Forces that lead not to a recognition of our shared community, but to a destruction of that community.

I have seen people of deep faith struggle with this because of the lived experience they have had with others. Struggled not so

much whether to see others as fellow Americans or children of God, but whether to be in relationship with them at all.

But I am convinced that it is our sinfulness that leads us down this path. That the enemy, the forces that defy God, delight in this rupture in relationship. For then it becomes easier for them to do their work. Of papering over our core identity and calling. As beloved child of God, with whom God is well pleased.

I am a student of history; you can see the result of this kind of rupture in relationship over time. The pogroms against Jews that periodically swept Medieval Europe, the same stereotypes and lack of relationship that led to the Holocaust and the death of millions of Jews during World War II.

The balkanization of identity that led to the Civil War here in the United States. The warping of the Reformation that led to a fractured church that delighted in persecuting each other.

There is much prayer, and conversation, confession and forgiveness to do my friends as we cling to our baptismal identity and seek to see that in others. And we will fall short of God's desire for us in how we regard and treat one another, for the power of sin clings to us despite this baptism... the symptoms lasting long after we are claimed.

But we have the most powerful medicine in the world- the love of God in Jesus Christ. We have the best balm in the universe, the

waters of baptism. Waters to cool our passions, to wash away all that blinds our sight, to remind us of our identity, as God's beloved children, with whom God is well pleased. We have our vocation through that identity to love others as God has loved us.

We have the meal of Christ's own body and blood. Given and shed for you, for each and every one of you, even those who we don't think deserve it.

And in this Meal and in these waters, we receive grace upon grace, and the strength to try again. To try and love one another in deed and in truth. To live our identity as beloved children of God.

My friends, this is who you are. The only identity that means anything. Repeat after me, "I am a baptized, beloved child of God, with whom God is well pleased."

In this new year of 2023, may it be so.