

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA Z3
1 Epiphany (Year C) 11:00 a.m. Baptism
Sunday 13 January 2019 Year of the Body

Isaiah 43:1-7
Psalm 29
Acts 8:14-17
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Seeking Reality

"You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you... Do not fear for I am with you" (Isa. 43).

All of us here this morning differ in so many obvious ways. We are different ages and races. We speak dozens of languages and come from hundreds of places. We are messy and neat, rich and poor, exhausted and alert, trying to fit in or hoping to stand out. We have different dreams, desires and beliefs.

But below the surface we share in common something profound. We all are seeking what is real. We hunger for it. You know what I mean. We encounter some much superficiality, so many half-truths and lies. And so we understand what it feels like to come across someone who really gets us. We appreciate someone who can be true.¹

Peter Haynes was my priest in college. He is one of the most real people I know. He chooses words cautiously. He respects me enough to care more about being honest than whether or not I feel comfortable. He doesn't hesitate to correct me. When I became dean of the Cathedral he drove six hours from Orange County just to shake my hand after the service. Then he drove six hours back home. He said the look on my face made it all worth it.

Although he once was the physically strongest priest in the Diocese he is frail and weak now. Yesterday I asked him what baptism means. He said that we are body, mind and soul. He pointed out that bodies and minds get a lot of attention in our society. But the challenge of our time is the world of the spirit.

For instance, fear drives us in irrational ways. I'm not just talking about the border wall. You can see this everywhere. We simply don't feel right. In one of the richest societies in human history we feel impoverished, hounded by scarcity. We face an epidemic of despair. We see it in various addictions, rising levels of depression, isolation and loneliness. It lies behind our rising suicide rates and broken politics.

Peter Haynes says that baptism is the beginning of a spiritual life. It is how we start to tend our spiritual nature, how we receive the Spirit. The Bible is a library of different books written by different authors for different times and places. But the idea of a

beloved child is a recurring theme. Think of all those joyful announcements about long awaited children being born.

Isaiah gives us a love letter from God. Shut your eyes and really try to hear this. "[T]hus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob he formed you... Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you... they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned... Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you..." (Isa. 43).

God calls Jesus his "beloved Son" and through him we become God's children too. We are spiritually healthy when God's love for us is most real. Through baptism with water and the Holy Spirit we encounter this reality. The bread and wine we share every week remind us that God loves us too much to leave us on our own.

Today I offer three very simple observations from the story of Jesus' baptism about spiritual healing and strength.

1. Chaff. With so much fear all around it is sometimes hard **not** to read the Bible in a fearful way. Luke uses a metaphor that we find confusing. He reports a short speech by John in which he talks about a "winnowing fork" and clearing the "threshing floor," gathering the wheat into the granary and burning the chaff with "unquenchable fire" (Lk. 3). The Greek word for unquenchable is *asbesto*, the root of our word *asbestos*.

I want to be very clear. This metaphor is not about good people going to heaven and bad ones being burned in hell. It is about repentance or more precisely it is about the primary spiritual task called *metanoia*. That's the Greek word we translate as repentance. It means to transform your life and soul.

At harvest each grain of wheat has a husk. The goal is not to separate good wheat from bad wheat but to save every grain. This is not a metaphor of separation and judgment. It is a metaphor of preservation and purification. The grain and the husks are thrown together into the air and the wind disperses the lighter husks.

There are large parts of ourselves that we will have to let go of in order to be happy, and for that matter to be part of God's Kingdom. It is as if we were carrying a huge backpack that extended high over our heads and around our sides. As we approach a narrow gate we realize that not everything we carry will fit through.

Envy, anxiety, gossip, insecurity, prejudice, greed, our sense of superiority, narcissism, a spirit of revenge, along with so much else these have to go. The spirit helps to sift through our lives to make us more perfect. In his book *The Great Divorce* C.S. Lewis writes about this process of letting go of what is false. He says, "heaven is reality."²

2. Humility. The second thing I want to point out about the reading involves two seemingly inconsequential words. The preacher Fred Craddock says these may be the most important words in the Bible.³ They are "Jesus also." The passage goes like this. After John's speech about the chaff, "when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also was baptized and was praying... the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form" (Lk. 3). "Jesus also."

The writers of the Bible all agree that baptism is for repentance or metanoia. It exists to transform our souls. Although Jesus does not need repentance, although God does not need to change anything about himself, God comes among us in this startling way. If God can join humanity in this ritual of renewal, we too can live humbly. We need to reject all forms of arrogance and not put ourselves above others. Christians should always be seeking forgiveness, focusing on what we need to change about ourselves rather than on how others could be better.

3. Prayer. The last simple thing you might have noticed in the Gospel has to do with prayer. The people have been baptized. Jesus himself has been baptized. Then Jesus prays and the Holy Spirit comes to him. And God's voice announces, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Lk. 3).

Our bodies require nutrition and exercise. Our minds need ideas, language and connections to other people. Prayer is the most important action for our spiritual life. We must have both what we call common prayer, that is prayer with other people in church, and individual prayer. In the *New York Times* this week Farhad Manjoo wrote an article called "You should Meditate Every Day." It is about how meditation has completely improved his life.⁴ It can help you too.

Prayer is the way we overcome the destructive fantasies we constantly generate and come to know something greater. It is the way we stop being a stranger to our self. It needs to be part of every day. We should set aside regular times for prayer and pray spontaneously too. As parents we should spend over ten years reading every night to our children. After you read tell your children what you are praying for and ask what they would like to pray for. Then say the Lord's Prayer together. Pray at meals. Pray in the morning when you wake up, as you travel and as you prepare to sleep.

The twentieth century theologian Karl Barth writes, "And faith as the work of the Holy Spirit is not a magical transformation. It is not a higher endowment with divine powers. It is simply that we acquire what we so much need... a teacher of truth within ourselves."⁵ That teacher is Christ. This is the way we realize that because we are God's children we have nothing to fear.

I vividly remember the day when I became a parent. I was standing at the hospital window, watching commuters on their way home as the sun was setting after a long summer day. I remember the light. It felt like such a contrast. The drivers were engaged in such an ordinary activity while for me the world seemed miraculous and utterly transformed. In that moment I knew everything had changed. I came closer to reality and to God.

We long for what is real. We won't be satisfied by anything else. So cultivate your spiritual life. Purify yourself of the anxiety, fear and selfishness that diminishes you. Be humble and don't regard yourself as better than anyone else. Persist in prayer so that Christ might shine more completely in your life. Never forget that you are "precious in [God's] sight, and honored" and God loves you.

¹ It might even be bad news but we want to know the truth.

² C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (NY: Macmillan, 1946) 69.

³ This particular example and much else in this sermon is inspired by Matt and Liz Boulton, "Jesus Also: Salt's Lectionary Commentary for Epiphany Week Two," 7 January 2019.

<http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/1/7/jesus-also-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-two>.

⁴ Farhad Manjoo, "You Should Meditate Every Day," *The New York Times*, 9 January 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/09/opinion/meditation-internet.html>

⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Volume 1, Part Two* Tr. G. T. Thomson, Harold Knight (NY: T&T Clark, 1956) 242.