

Text: Matthew 3: 13-17
Title: Born Identity
Date: 01.13.08
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I have a friend who is a therapist. He sits with his legs crossed and a tall cup of Starbucks in his hands, in an office cluttered with books and work out equipment, and he listens.

He listens to people tell their stories. In bits and pieces, in fits and starts, like broken records and like geysers, recounting moments that were mundane and moments that were momentous, trying to remember and trying to forget, people tell their stories and he listens.

Everybody has a story ~

and we may tell it one way at the end of the bar,
and one way to the girl we're trying to impress,
and one way to the parole board,
and one way to our parents....

But, my therapist friend listens and asks questions and helps reinterpret and reframe and get at recurring and defining themes in those stories. He listens in a way that helps people cut through all that mucks and all that muddles to get to a "core script."

"A core script" is his phrase for those essential gifts and curses, those events and patterns that define who we are. We are all working with a core script. By nature and by nurture we all have a script that we are stuck with but not fully determined by, for it is also a script to which we can write new chapters and explore new themes and develop new images. In the words of Lew Smedes:

I'd like to put it this way: We are all born with a story to write, but we can only write it with the raw material we're given. What God wants of us is to write the best story we can out of what we have.

I like that. We are all writing stories. And this morning, as budding young authors or as seasoned writers, we are all working with our core scripts.

You could be mired in worry and sadness,
or bowled over like you just got hit by a bus,
or buoyantly awaiting what comes next,
or bored,
or pulled down by a depression that won't even let you flip the page,
or confidently basking in the moment,
or just a little lost,
but we are all writing stories.

Well, the baptism of Jesus is a core script. The birth of baby Jesus in Bethlehem isn't recorded in all the gospels, but the baptism of Jesus is. You will find it in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and it is alluded to in John. In writing the

story of Jesus the gospel writers saw this baptismal event as essential to understanding Jesus. It is not incidental, it is not tangential, but it gets at the core of who Jesus is. And maybe, in turn, gets at the core of who we are.....

When Jesus joins John on the banks of the River Jordan to be baptized it is not a baptism of repentance, but it is a baptism of identity,
or vocation,
or submission.

Identity, vocation, submission ~ seems like this is the morning I offer a three point sermon... Ah, sorry, no.

Jesus doesn't show up to repent of the sins of his wayward youth, rather he shows up to learn, or affirm, or accept, or live into who he already is.

So, John balks ~ he is not sure what to do with Jesus.

But, Jesus walks ~ he wades into the water with John.

And, then all manner of cosmic drama breaks out:

The membrane between heaven and earth is split,
the Spirit descends,
the Son ascends,
and the voice of God defines reality:

This is my son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased.

It is a powerful-profound-cinematic-seminal-epiphanal-mythic-moment.
Kathleen Norris writes of it:

The occasion of his baptism is so momentous that we are jolted all the way back to the first chapter of Genesis, as the separation of earth and sky that God established at creation is refigured. God breaks through in order to speak directly to human beings.

It is a core script moment.

Jesus knows who he is.

Jesus joins us.

Jesus launches his ministry, his mission, his meaning. *Again three points...*

Jesus rises up, dripping wet, with identity and blessing.

My friend, the therapist, also says that most people ~ in working with their core scripts ~ are looking for a blessing. They are longing to hear the blessing of a parent, or they are hoping to hold on to the blessing from a loved one, or they are trying to believe the blessing of God. But, a lot of us have tapes that play in our heads.

Tapes that tell us that we aren't good enough,

or that we're a disappointment,

or that we're fatally flawed,

or that we're failures.

And, somehow over those tapes we are straining to hear that we are loved and accepted. In the middle of our stories we are listening for a blessing.

Jesus is blessed by God.

When Jesus comes to be baptized, John's first impulse is to resist, because for John it is all wrong. Jesus is the greater one; Jesus should be the one to baptize him. What John doesn't yet understand, is that what it means for Jesus to be the greater one is for him to submit to the lesser one. Soon John will hear it everywhere Jesus goes: the last shall be first, the least shall be the greatest, and the humble will be exalted, etc, etc.

But, in his baptism, we don't hear Jesus preach this message; we see him embody it. The long-awaited Anointed One allows himself to be plunged into the water by John and comes spluttering up the blessed, beloved son. It is Jesus' submission that is pleasing to God, for it "fulfills all righteousness."

Jesus empties self to be one of us, even unto death, and hears the blessing of his Father.

This is my son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased.

Now, that is not to say that Jesus doesn't have the blessing of God unless he joins us in death ~ but it is to say that this baptism signals Jesus being united with us, even in death, and God giving his blessing.

Whew! What a lot of Bible talk...

Dear friends no matter what story you are writing this morning,
no matter what issues define your core script,
we all long to be blessed by God.
We all long to hear God break in over us and speak unmistakably:

*This is my son, whom I love.
This is my daughter, whom I love.
With you I am well pleased.*

And! The core of the gospel is that we have the blessing of God in and through Jesus Christ ~ of which our baptism is a sign and a seal.

Our blessing – is drenched, drowned, and dependent on Christ.

As he is united with us in death ~ we are united with him in resurrection.

As he is united with us in sin ~ we are united with him in salvation.

As he is born the child of a woman ~ we are adopted as the children of God.

As he is blessed ~ we are blessed.

This morning Caitlin has written into her story a moment of blessing. I doubt that the roof cracked open and the sky split wide and she heard the voice of God. And, I doubt that

these little dribbles of water, so clumsily delivered, carry the affective-dramatic-charge of wading into a river and being dunked into death and raised up to new life.

But, Caitlin's baptism clearly reminds us

that our identity,
that our core script,
that our blessing,
is in belonging to God through Christ.

The church that I served in up-state New York was an old stone cathedral. With high vaulted ceilings, long center aisle, slate floors, and stately wood, it was a sanctuary of dignity and awe. It would take a bit of your breath away. Just before we left there for here the congregation began a debate about a multi-million dollar renovation of the church building. The old beauty needed some care. The senior pastor wanted to remove the pews and reconfiguring the sanctuary with portable seating. There was considerable ruckus and restlessness. The senior pastor didn't get his way....

But, there was one idea that I liked.

They talked about taking out the back seven pews and placing a large, rough hewn rock, right at the entrance to the sanctuary. Smack dab in the center, just inside the door, there would be rock with a baptismal bowl built into its natural shape. Maybe even the quiet bubbling of water in the rock.

What I liked about it was that baptismal memory would be built into the church architecture. With every entrance to the sanctuary you would be reminded of your identity. You would remember your roots. You would bump into your blessing.

A lot of Catholic churches have little pools of water at the doorway ~ I've known Protestants to mistake them for ashtrays. But, they are there for the same reason:

to remind you of your identity,
to write your core script,
to sign and seal your baptismal memory.

Dear friends, from week to week, with liturgy and music, in silence and sermon, in simple sacrament and mystery, we endeavor to remind one another that our stories are part of a larger story, and that our core scripts are part of God's core covenantal script, and that... And that we do the best we can with the raw materials we have.

But finally my deepest hope, my prayer is that God will break through and you will hear, again and again....

This is my son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased.

This is my daughter, whom I love. With her I am well pleased.

May that be your etched in your core script.

Amen.