

SERMON FOR YEAR C, FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

LUKE 3:15-17,21-22

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SAINT THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH

JANUARY 10, 2010

“DEEP”

On Friday of this week, January the 8th, I very quietly celebrated
The fifth year of my ordination to the priesthood.
Then on Saturday, Jacquie and I celebrated 17 years of marriage together.
Squeezed into that same day was the fifth anniversary of Gabriel's baptism.

When I was ordained priest, a person who was then a parishioner,
And who remains a friend –
A Texas gentleman through and through named Mike McFarland –
Gave me a book as an ordination gift.

The book was a collection of short fiction written by him
And titled *The Eighth of January and Other Stories*.
It was published in 1984.

A month or so after receiving the book from Mike,
I commented that the title of his book was fortuitous,
And that I was glad to get it on that day.

He looked at me slyly and said,
“You have no idea. I've waited 21 years for something to good to happen on January 8th
So I could give that book to someone as a gift!”

Now, that's revolutionary patience.

The title of the book comes from a story in it with the same name.
The title of the *story* refers to a popular old fiddle song
Which commemorates the events of January 8, 1815 –
The last day of the Battle of New Orleans,
Which was the last battle of the War of 1812.
“January the 8th” is a song marking the end of a long period of upheaval,
And you can hear that turn to a hopeful place being played in the music itself.

At any rate, it's this song that's being played by two fiddlers in the story –
An aging farmer named Clarence, and a promising young musician named Mark.
These two men set to playing together at a church social on a winter night in Texas,
And here's how Mike writes the scene:
“Their heads were inclined to each other.
The two bows moved as if an invisible thread connected them
And Clarence, perhaps a bit touched by the moment,
Thought he saw a thin, almost transparent blue arc of light pass between them.”

What Clarence knows in that moment – what in fact he has just found out –
What probably no one else knows inside the story –
Is that his fiddle is actually an exceptionally rare 18th-Century violin
Worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.
It is the key to a comfortable retirement, the end of farming, a warm house.

But when that blue arc passes between him and Mark,
He's so transformed by the moment, and sees such potential in Mark,
That he arranges to swap fiddles with him,
And Clarence goes home with the so-so fiddle,
While Mark leaves with a priceless violin
Which will bring joy to who knows how many people for countless years to come.

Clarence is not interested in what is *fair*, or in what he *deserves* after a lifetime of work.
He'll probably die broke. Nothing surprising there.
But for now, he simply wants to extend himself into the life of another;
He wants to see that other person flourish and get free and be happy and make music.
And Clarence discovers that doing that allows *him* to feel free, too.

Clarence reminds me of what Evelyn Underhill said about the life of the spirit.
She said that "Those who have a deep and real inner life are best able to deal with outer life."
In other words, that a "deep and real inner life" can cope with whatever surrounds it.
Put still another way: that *a settled and rooted spirit is hard to trouble, tough to shake*.
Lindy Black likes that advice from Evelyn Underhill, and he nuances it like this:
"Something deep inside," he says, "calls for something deep to answer it."

The best and deepest in a rooted soul can take just about anything.
Can continue to take a hard life,
If it means seeing another life made better,
If it means seeing another life giving out great joy for the sake of other lives.
I don't think I'd have had much of a chance of really getting this before I became a father,
But Clarence traded in his Volvo for a Pinto, and he couldn't have been happier.

There's an image like that in the Bible I sometimes consider
When I hear or read about Jesus' baptism,
And though it isn't found in Luke, it seems to quietly commend itself today.

In Psalm 42, the author is in a heap of trouble.
His life is utterly disordered.
He imagines himself, for just a moment, standing at the base of a great waterfall,
With all the junk of his life cresting over the ledge above him,
Hanging in the air a second,
And then pounding down on him.
It's a potent idea – I know I've been to that exact place; I suspect you have, too.

That place where everything comes together in a great and beautiful mess;
Where it all seems to want to fall apart.

The psalmist puts himself right under the loudest part of that waterfall of pain,
And he says to himself, *Even so: Deep calls to deep.*
Day and night God is with me.

Forgive this remark if it isn't theologically stable,
But Jesus' baptism can't be like just any baptism – not to me.

When we are baptised, as we will do with little Lillian next week,
We join a family and make promises about what being in that family will mean for us.
Something else is happening with the Christ.
Some argue over whether this was the moment of God's adoption of Jesus as a Son.
Maybe it is; I don't know.
But when Jesus is baptised, it represents to *me*
His bonding with the whole of the created order, and everything that implies.
That's a bond that will be put to the test, and not found wanting.

And so when Jesus is immersed in the waters of the Jordan,
It is the beginning of him standing beneath a great cascade of pain,
For as we know: He proceeds from here to the desert,
Where *the deepest in him* will cry out,
And he will emerge knowing who and what he is.

When we do baptisms these days, it's with a little water, a little oil, a little flame;
Nice photographs of babies and people in neckties;
Certificates and cakes.

But the Spirit of Jesus is at the bottom of that baptismal font,
Immersing himself in the great troubles of your life.
Bend and stoop over the water, and see if you can't catch his image.

That font is the primary symbol of your life in him, your ministry in him.
An indissoluble bond occurs there,
Whether you are a few months old or on your last leg.

In baptism, the deepest in us calls out to the deepest in God;
And the deepest in God calls out to the deepest in us.
“A thin, almost transparent blue arc of light [passes] between,”
And the church has the audacity to name that this is so.

In that moment, in that gifting, in that sacramental mystery, the whole world is remade.
We descend in hope, in terror, in amazement, to the water and to death,
And these words of comfort are etched on our souls:
The sacrifice of God is an untroubled heart.

May it be so.