

January 14, 2008 Baptism of our Lord Sunday

Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

In this time, when we are still trying to remember to write 2008 on our checks and school reports ... when we are bombarded by suggestions about how we can fulfill this year's resolutions ... when maybe we have already given up on our resolutions and are tired of hearing about diets, discount gym offers, and better ways to manage our finances ... God's voice enters in the clamour and says, "Remember who you are."

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As I was listening to our scripture for this morning, an image came to mind: the vision of life in a sailboat versus life in a rowboat.

The challenge when we hear the call to resolutions and the talk of transformation and change from our scripture lessons is that we get excited, maybe even inspired ... we assess our lives, choose the program that is best for us, get determined and start rowing. It feels good to take charge and work to change your life. As you row, you see yourself making progress. You listen to the instructions and learn how to turn the boat, pace yourself and dig in when big waves come. As a Christian, you'll turn to God in prayer and study scripture in your rowboat for guidance and make sure you stay on course. And you row ... and row ... and row in the big vast body of water with others, who are also rowing their boats.

Now, the trouble with human beings is that we are never quite satisfied with our own calling, our own lives. We start looking around or get tired or disoriented by the last big wave that hit us and we begin asking questions: Why are they able to row faster than I am? When that wave hit, why didn't they take on the same amount of water as me? Or how did they bail out and heal so fast? How did they have time to give their boat a new coat of paint or buy the better cushions for their seat? Why aren't they heading in the same direction as me? Are they praying more, studying the Bible better, working harder,

being more faithful or less sinful? As we row, life becomes a race, a competition or as Ecclesiastes summarized, a lot of vanity heading nowhere.

It is hard to address these questions, because of the motivating forces involved. It is deeply engrained in our society and culture, the systemic sinfulness, evil, temptation that moves us back and forth between two polls. We deeply believe that the only way to move people to change or act or even believe is to use one of two options fear of punishment or the desire of reward. Just look at attempts being made around healthcare in this nation. Many insurance companies and employers are going with the reward method, offering Flexible Spending Accounts where you can earn bonus dollars by doing preventative tests and exams or signing up for an exercise program to reduce your out of pocket costs. On the other side, there are companies threatening fines or termination of your job, ... if you don't lose enough pounds, quit smoking or lower your cholesterol numbers.

Both forces put the energy and action to keep on rowing, back on the individual. We are either rowing away from the fear of being swamped or toward the possibility of getting a bigger boat or maybe the promise of not having to row ever again.

And God's voice comes into the midst of this and says, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon you ... I am the Lord." Remember who you are.

Have any of you rented the Lion King lately? Do you remember the story line? Simba's father is killed trying to save Simba from being trampled by a stampede. The cub, Simba, carries a great deal of shame and guilt, because his father had warned him not to wander off ... so he blamed himself for his father's death and runs away. After returning home grown up, the wise baboon takes Simba to the lagoon in an effort to get Simba to move, to act, to answer his call, but he uses a force other than fear or reward ... he points to identity. In the water of the lagoon, Rafiki the baboon tries to show Simba his father. Simba sees the reflection of himself, saying that it isn't his father, it's just a reflection of himself. Rafiki says "Look Harder, he lives in you." When Simba looks again he hears the voice of his father saying: Simba, you have forgotten who you are, you are more than you have become, Remember who you are..."

This is why our journey of faith begins with baptism ... the same place Jesus' ministry began, so we will remember the only force that can move us and sustain our life is the Spirit of God and the identity God gives us. "God knows us before we know who God is, ... in this sacrament [we encounter God] and are told who we are....a child of God." (Kathryn Self, Plano TX)¹

Like with the healthcare question, ... what if you respond instead by saying, "I want to be healthy because I am a child of God and I want to be able to do all the things God has in store for my life"? Now, changes things.

That's why I think the image of a sailboat is better than a rowboat for our life with God. Now I appreciate that there are sailboats that can be managed by only one person, but scripture is pretty clear that when God claims individuals and sends them, the goal is to put together a crew. Take Abraham, blessed to be a blessing and a father of nations, beyond his ability to count the stars. Moses was called to rescue God's people from slavery. And Jesus was sent because God so loved the world.

So, the only experience I have with sailing is when my family decided to do a side activity on a cruise, where we entered a regatta on former America Cup sailboats. The captains assigned every member of the crew, based on our abilities, a very specific job. After practicing some and being reminded several times how important it was to listen to the captain's instructions ... to be ready at a moment's notice to respond ... we headed out to sea.

The race started, we did everything we were instructed to do and beautifully, the sails filled with the breeze and it was freeing to feel the surge of the boat, moving through the waters. And because we were on vacation, once our jobs were completed, we sat back and enjoyed the rays, chatted, maybe even taunted the other boat a bit, as we slightly edged them out. And maybe this is the complaint of those in the rowboats, who are constantly working and in control... that it is easy to take grace and the work of the Spirit for granted. But, rowboats don't rely upon the Spirit at all. The wind is blowing all around them, but they

¹ <http://www.textweek.com/movies/baptism.htm>

are getting none of the joy or benefit or relief as they rely on their own effort and strength moving of the oars.

And as the sailboat crew discovered, when you have to rely on wind as your only source of power ... it is good when you are in sync, but when it changes direction you have to be ready to respond or suddenly your sails are loosely flapping and you are moving nowhere. The captain sensed it, but we did not. Suddenly, he was barking orders, telling people to duck and dig in to doing our jobs, at the precise moment that he told us to do it. We suddenly saw how important every job was from the least to the greatest and how intertwined each one was and dependent upon the other for a unified, smooth refilling of our sails. It wasn't pretty, but eventually we got moving again. Sound at all like being the church, the body of Christ?

Remember who you are. You are a child of God. God, your creator gives breath to the people upon earth and spirit to those who walk upon it. God says, "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; [I am the wind in your sails] and have given you as a promise to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to free those who are bound or rowing or living in fear and darkness. See, the former things are passing away and new things I now declare, through you my servant." (summarized Isaiah 42)

With Jesus, we return to the waters and remember where all this begins; with God's action ... with God speaking over the waters and bringing order out of chaos ... God claiming and desiring a deep and lasting relationship with all people ... God breaking in over and over again when we run away or row off determined to do it on our own or when we think we've messed up so bad that nothing good can come of us ... God breaks in and says, look more closely, you have forgotten who you are, you are part of something bigger than you think ... Remember who you are. My soul delights in you. The Spirit is blowing, my purpose is sure ... together we will do new things and all will see the glory of God, now and forever amen.