

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 11, 2009
Epiphany 1/Baptism of our Lord
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 42:1-8
Psalm 89:20-29
Acts 10:34-38
Mark 1:5-11

This morning as we embark upon a new year it is natural for us to wonder what will be in store for us as the new year unfolds.

What will 2009 be like? Will we see developments toward peace, or will we see heightening of tensions and more war around the world?

Will the economy grow and the market rise, or will we see tougher economic times?

Will we be able to keep our new year's resolutions, or will the enthusiasm and promise of the new year fade away after a few months?

It is no coincidence that our Gospel lesson from Mark comes to us on this day as we enter into a new year. For Mark makes clear that all our human aspirations and desires are pinned on one thing -- and that thing is a Person.

Mark tells us very succinctly in verse 9: "One day Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and he was baptized by John in the Jordan River."

Now it is very important for us to see that we don't learn *who* Jesus is from what he does or does not do in this story. Instead, we learn who Jesus is by a

pronouncement made by God. As Jesus emerges from the River Jordan, the voice from heaven says: “You are my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with you.”

Please do not miss this. Before Jesus *does* anything -- before he cures the blind or raises the dead; before he teaches in the temple; before he turns water into wine; before he dies on the Cross, there is a revelation: “You are my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with you.” *Jesus’ identity is established first, and the whole rest of Mark’s Gospel is a working out of that identity.*

When Andrew was little, before we would attend a public event or before he would go to play at a friend’s house, we would look at him and tell him, “remember who you are. You are a Thelander.”

I don’t think we ever formally defined what “being a Thelander” meant on paper, but there was this implied understanding that meant Andrew behaved in a certain way. So when we said to him, “remember who you are,” that was a simple way to try to empower him to be at his best. It was an uncomplicated way to remind him of his identity.

Come with me now from Jesus’ baptism here in Mark to what happens immediately after this event.

Do you remember what happens next? Jesus is driven into the wilderness, where he is tested and tempted by Satan. Matthew and Luke record these attacks of Satan, which all begin in the same fashion:

“If you are the Son of God, turn these stones to bread.”

“If you are the Son of God, throw yourself from the temple, and God’s angels will protect you.”

1 Satan’s strategy is to say, “If you are the Son of God, prove it.” Do you see the strategy? Satan tries first and foremost here *to rob Jesus of his identity*, to make him doubt *who* he is. If he can do that, then he can ruin Jesus before he even begins, and prevent him from accomplishing his mission.

In these harsh moments of testing, I’d like to think that the Father whispered into Jesus’ ear: “Remember who you are. You are my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with you.”

Now here we are this morning, embarking upon a new year. It is a natural time for us to think about many things: what will we do this year? How will we achieve our goals? How will it all play out? What are we seeking to accomplish?

But those questions, appropriate as they may be, distract us from the central question we need to ask in this coming year. I submit to you this morning that the most important question you face in 2009 will not be a question of *what*, or *how*, or *why*. The key question you will face this year is this: *Who will you be?*

The important task before you this year is not to determine how you will achieve your goals, or how the new year will unfold, or what will happen as it unfolds. *The important task before you in this year is for you to remember your identity as a beloved child of God.*

You are God's beloved. How do I know this? Because it was proclaimed and made clear to you in your own baptism. In your baptism God named you and claimed you as his beloved child. In your baptism God said, "you are mine, and you are loved." And in your baptism, God commissioned you to take up the work that corresponds with living a new life and bearing witness to God's reign.

The new year is upon us. I don't have a crystal ball this morning, and I don't know what is in store for you in 2009. But on the authority of this Gospel lesson from Mark, let me offer you this counsel:

In this new year you will experience your share of ups and downs.

Remember who you are.

In this new year you will succeed at some things, and fail at others.

Remember who you are.

In this new year, you will be tempted to become cynical. *Remember who you are.*

In this new year you will become discouraged, and will be tempted to give up. *Remember who you are.*

In this new year you may be tested, and tempted to doubt God's purpose for you. If that happens, *remember who you are.*

As this new year unfolds, focus your energy not on *how* life will unfold, and *what* will happen, but on *who* you will be as it happens. Remember *who* you are,

and remember *Whose* you are. If you do, I predict that 2009 will be one of the greatest years of your life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.