

# Sermons at St. Paul's

*A Wellspring of Spiritual Nourishment; A River of Service in Jesus'  
Name*

**January 10, 2010, First Sunday after The Epiphany  
The Reverend Nancy Burton Dilliplane**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One God, Amen.

Well, the magi finally made it to Bethlehem. When I walked into the church on January 6<sup>th</sup>—Epiphany—the three figures from our nativity set, who have been making their way closer to the Holy Family, windowsill by windowsill, had finally arrived.

In some parts of the world, people exchange gifts on January 6<sup>th</sup> instead of December 25<sup>th</sup>, in remembrance of those wise men from the east and their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

I wonder, what is the best gift you ever received? I can't decide between the Christmas my grandmother gave me a kitten—a purring, amber-eyed ball of cream colored fluff—or the year I was given my silver, open-hole flute. (Although my gift this year, a Keurig coffee maker, is right up there. The decadence of a perfect cup of coffee at the press of a button. A truly great gift.)

What about you? What are some of your favorite gifts?

And, I wonder, what about Jesus? What about that long ago child who had the treasures of the Orient laid at his feet? Which gift was his favorite—gold for a king? Frankincense for a priest? Myrrh for one whose *death* would be important? (I can't help thinking about that Monty Python movie *The Life of Brian*, about another boy, born in Bethlehem at the same time as Jesus. When the wise men visit Brian, mistaking him for the newborn king, Brian's mother thanks them for their visit and for their gifts—especially the gold and frankincense. Come again, she says, only next time, you needn't bother about the myrrh!) Which gift, I wonder, was Jesus' favorite? Which was most important?

Maybe Jesus' best gift wasn't a thing at all, but the gift of a faithful mother, who sang about her vision of God's kingdom—where the low are lifted high, and the hungry are filled with good things—while her son played at her feet. Or maybe it was the gift of good friends, like Mary and Martha and Lazarus, whose home in Bethany was a place of refuge and refreshment for Jesus in his travels. Maybe it was the gift of a little boy's lunch, given away to feed those who were hungry. Maybe it was the gift of devotion, expressed in the extravagant pouring of fragrant ointment upon aching feet.

Or maybe, just maybe, the best gift Jesus was ever given was the gift of his baptism, which we remember today. "When Jesus had been baptized," Luke tells us, "Heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.""

A gift indeed. Imagine the gift of a tangible affirmation of God's love—the Holy Spirit so real that you can see and touch it, God's voice something you can actually hear. Imagine knowing, beyond a shadow of a doubt that the heavens open for *you*, *you* are God's beloved child, *you* please your creator. Imagine the gift of knowing with unshakeable certainty that *you* belong to God. That would be a gift worth having. One that could never be taken away. One whose value would not diminish, but might, indeed, increase over time.

I imagine, in the days and weeks ahead, that Jesus returned to the memory of that amazing gift time after time. When he was at odds with synagogue leaders and temple authorities, I imagine him finding solace in the memory of God's pleasure. When his family thought he was crazy, I imagine him closing his eyes and hearing again the voice that said, "You are my Son." When he was driven into the wilderness and tempted by Satan, I imagine him clinging to the memory of being called "Beloved." When Jesus' disciples didn't seem to understand what he was about, when he betrayed and denied by his inner circle, I imagine that those moments following his baptism served as a touch stone that validated his person and his ministry. I imagine he returned again and again to the memory of his baptism, to God's physical presence, and the voice that told him who he was—the Beloved, the Son of God. What an incomparable gift!

I think maybe Jesus shows us just how much he valued the gift of God's Spirit and God's love in the way that he begins his ministry in the synagogue in Capernaum—"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus said, "because he has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus was able to bring the good news of a present and loving God, because he experienced that presence and love first hand. And Jesus was empowered to share that good news because he himself had received it as a gift. **You** are my Son. **You** are beloved. With **you** I am pleased.

That was the gift Jesus received at his baptism. And I invite you to consider that in Baptism God offers each of us that very same gift. In our baptisms, our own identity is affirmed, own vocation sealed. Each and every one of us is given, in baptism, the same assurance that Jesus received that day beside the river Jordan. **You** are God's child. **You** are beloved. I am pleased with **you**.

Did you notice that when the Holy Spirit and the voice of God's affirmation come to Jesus, he has not yet done anything? God does not call him beloved because of what he has done, but because of who he is, God's Son. And because of who God is. The same is true for us. We are not baptized because of what we have done, but because of who we are, God's children, and because of who God is. God's love and blessing is bestowed as pure, unearned gift. It comes to us on the wings of the Holy Spirit because God wills it to be so. God calls us beloved and God is pleased by our existence because God is the One whose nature it is to love, to redeem and to restore.

The love bestowed on us in baptism is the same love God expressed for Israel, through the prophet Isaiah:

Do not fear. I have redeemed you, I have called you by name and you are mine. **I** am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. And you? **You** are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. Do not fear, for I am with you.

Now, Israel hadn't done anything to deserve that kind of love. In fact, they had done much that had NOT made them particularly loveable in God's sight—they had failed to live by the Law, failed to be a people of love and justice. In fact, when these tender, baptismal words are spoken to Israel, they are in exile, separated from the God who had chosen them as God's people. It is God's relentless love alone that calls Israel back and restores them.

Anathea Portier-Young, an Old Testament Professor at Duke Divinity School writes about the gift of God's redeeming love this way:

God speaks to God's people not like a king on a throne pronouncing an edict, but like a lover whose heart is bursting, who has waited an eternity just to say their name. In this act of speaking their name, God claims Israel as God's own and sets them free. "You are mine" means also "I have ransomed you". Maker, lover, and redeemer, God will pay any price and overcome every obstacle to be reunited with God's own.

That seeking and reuniting love reached its full expression in Jesus, and through him, it is the gift that we still receive in baptism. Not because we've earned it, but because God wills it.

Those waters still part, heaven still opens, and the Holy Spirit still descends—for us. Baptism is given as a gift, and it is our touchstone, giving us our identity and our vocation. We are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own.

Now, being marked as God's own doesn't mean that from now on it's going to be smooth sailing. Baptism is not that kind of gift. Note that Isaiah does not say to Israel "because you are precious in God's sight, nothing bad will ever happen to you again." Indeed, Isaiah pretty much guarantees Israel that they *will* meet trial and hardship: **when** you pass through the waters, **when** you walk through the fire.

But then, Jesus—*the* beloved—wasn't handed an easy life, either. No sooner did he break the surface of the water in which he was baptized than he was sent out into the wilderness and tempted by Satan. And when he returned, he began a ministry of proclaiming God's kingdom—a ministry that set him on a collision course with the political and religious establishment, and led him on to the cross. As it turns out, there is no gold and frankincense without the myrrh.

And the same is true for us. Our baptism is less a guarantee of smooth sailing than it is an anchor for the stormy seas that lie ahead when we begin living the life of the Beloved. It may even be that being marked as Christ's own will send us straight into those storm tossed seas. The power of God's love that liberates those held captive, and restores sight to the blind, that makes the infirm whole and brings life out of death is also a power that sets us, the baptized, on a collision course with all that imprisons, blinds, cripples and robs of life.

But in baptism, we are equipped to stay that course. We know without doubt to whom we belong, that we are called by name, precious in God's sight and loved. We may walk through flood and flame, but, because God is with us, and we belong to God, we will not be overwhelmed or consumed.

Paul expresses his baptismal certainty this way in his letter to the Romans:

If God is for us, who is against us? Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Such is God's gift of love. When you are surrounded by fire or threatened by the swirling waters—of illness, of loss, of discouragement, of powerlessness, of need—remember your baptism. It is given as a touch stone to remind you that you are not defined by any of those things, you do not belong to powers of pain and hunger and want and brokenness. You belong instead to the One who is in their midst, unchanging and unchangeable, the one who says, "Fear not, I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, and you are mine."

God's gift to you is that in the midst of all that threatens to overcome, separate and destroy, you have been marked forever as belonging to the One who re-creates, reconciles and rebuilds. You belong to the one who is Love. The heavens open for you, the Holy Spirit has descended upon you and sealed you forever. You are called by name, a precious child of God.

You are beloved. You are well pleasing to God. That is God's great gift to you, on the day of your baptism and always.

So, in this season of gift giving, let us give thanks for all that we've been given, from kittens to coffee makers. And let us remember our baptism. Amen.