

Getting His Meaning, His Identity, His Destiny.
1 Epiphany C

This Sunday we start the new season of Epiphany after a brief twelve days of Christmas. Epiphany is the word that speaks of God's appearing to his people. The season starts by remembering three wonderful events in the church's life: the visit of the Magi to the Christ child on January 6, the baptism of Jesus the following Sunday and next Sunday, the miracle of changing water into wine by Jesus at a wedding. Today we celebrate the appearing of the Holy Spirit at Jesus baptism. It is a day when we celebrate our baptism at whatever time that occurred in our lives.

Baptism was never meant to be controversial. It was practiced by John the Baptist as a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus underwent that baptism to lead the way for his followers to enter into a new covenant with God. The Episcopal Church calls baptism a sacrament or "sign" expected by Jesus of his disciples. The only other sign commanded by our Lord was the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. That is where similarities end with sister churches.

Some say you have to do baptism as close to birth as possible. Others say it should wait for an age of understanding. Some say any amount of water will do and others say the more water the better. And it begins from there, as disagreements continue over when the rebirth of baptism happens.

An Anglican priest and a Baptist minister were discussing baptism. The Anglican asked the Baptist if he considered a person baptized if he was immersed in water up to his WAIST.

"No," said the Baptist.

"Do you consider him baptized if he is immersed in water up to his NECK?" asked the Anglican.

Again the Baptist's answer was: "No."

"Well now," said the Anglican, "suppose you immersed him up to his EYEBROWS? Would you consider him baptized THEN?"

"No," said the Baptist.

“Well then, there you have it!” said the Anglican. “It’s only the little bit of water on the TOP OF THE HEAD that counts!”

What does count in baptism is the rejuvenation of the soul by the Holy Spirit. The best way to describe this process are the liquids we use in our plumbing to get out plugs and debris that clog it up. The plugs don't always come up on the first try. The chemicals however continue to work overnight. And in the morning -FLUSH!!

Baptism reconnects us to God because it is the door through which we enter into a relationship with him through Jesus Christ. In baptism we identify with Jesus - not so much as the Messiah, God's anointed ambassador who brings judgment but as God's "beloved son...". And this "beloved" immerses his children into his holy nature, the Holy Spirit. It is the one anointed by the Holy Spirit that "pleases" God. As Jesus came to us by water and the Spirit so we likewise come to God and are reborn taking on his likeness and grow up into his image.

So how do we grow into our baptism and into the image of God? **First we need to identify with our baptism. Today we will renew our vows asking God to make us stronger followers of Christ for the journey ahead is unknown.**

The year 2007 is the 400th anniversary of the first English colony in the “New World.”

One of the three ships that brought the colonists to Jamestown was *Godspeed*, a three-masted square-rigger that sailed the Atlantic for nearly five months to get to Virginia. The ship was just 88 feet long - about the length of a double tractor-trailer - and had a top speed of about 4 miles per hour. The colonists endured what we would consider to be intolerable conditions, with 13 crew members working on the deck and 39 passengers stuck in the cargo hold with 40 tons of supplies.

The smell? It must have made grown men cry.

Imagine yourself on board the *Godspeed*, pulling out of London on a cold winter day, December 20, 1606. You cruise down the Thames River without any problems, but then hit the English Channel, which

is being raked by stiff winds from the ocean. It takes you six full weeks of sailing to clear the channel.

Today, we can jet to London in six hours. Four centuries ago, it took six weeks to make it down the channel and out to the open seas.

Then you cross the Bay of Biscay and turn south toward the Canary Islands. There you replenish your water supply, and catch the strong trade winds which push you across the Atlantic Ocean.

The weeks pass slowly, with nothing to look at, nothing to do. Boredom takes over. Food rots. Tempers flare. People stink. Cats and Dogs living together!

Finally, you sail into the Caribbean. The island of Dominica becomes your first landing site, and from there you hop to the Virgin Islands, where you do some hunting and fishing. According to the records of John Smith, the most famous passenger aboard the ship, you feast every day on iguanas, tortoises and pelicans, as well as "Parrots and Fishes."

Delicious.

You sail north in search of Virginia, but find that your destination is not so easy to reach. Although your calculations indicate that you should be there, for three days you search, but see no land. Then a violent storm strikes your ship, and you have to drop sail and ride it out. There is no way to steer the ship in such conditions, and you fear being blown onto the offshore bars of North Carolina's Outer Banks. There, all crew and passengers would be washed into the sea and drowned.

But God is with you, and you are driven by the wind into the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. On April 26, 1607, you make landfall at Cape Henry, and then on May 14 you finally reach your destination - Jamestown.

You have been delivered by *Godspeed*, a ship whose name means "May God cause you to succeed." Against all odds the explorers of the New World took seriously their vows in their God. They identified

with God as their true success. And he guided them to the shores of their destiny. **Our baptism is our Christian identity.**

Second, identify with the family of God. The family of God is the family of faith. Are we willing to openly identify ourselves as belonging to this family?

Do our neighbors know that we are Christians? Do our coworkers know it? Do the parents of our children's friends know we follow Christ? But beyond just knowing we claim that identity, what have they learned from watching and listening to us about who *Jesus* is?

Jesus reminds the Twelve, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). He didn't say distance yourself from Judas so they will know you aren't whacky, too!

The family of God has business in the world. It has work to do and Jesus identified himself with all who would come to God's family, and we must as well.

The tax collectors were baptized by John, and then Jesus was. God gave his son Jesus another name on his baptism day. It comes from today's gospel reading. "Beloved." And our family name is "Beloved." Just like our human families, our spiritual family must get to know one another better as the "Beloved." A plan must be made for each of us to know one another better. We can no longer justify being strangers. Get used to it - eternity with the person sitting in the pew next to you is a very long time! So why would we as family not want to be visiting each other?

Finally, identify with Jesus. Jesus Christ models for us the only true place to find our approval.

Sometimes we can be such insecure, approval-seeking people. Our clothes have labels, our honor-roll children have bumper stickers, our titles put letters behind our names ... and if you can fathom this at all - identifying each other by ringtones and user IDs!

Cyber-identity. Cyber-attention. Cyber-approval.

Now, how much would our MyAccount culture flip out to hear the words of approval Jesus heard? How would we feel if we were given the name that he was given that day - **Beloved**?

There is a call to each of us to remember that God grants us this new identity - **we are his beloved children**. The MyAccount void in each of us is filled not through impressing people and gaining their approval, but through the mere fact that the Father calls us family. And if we are good enough for him, we are good enough.

We follow Salvation. **He** is Beloved. **He** is the Messiah. **He** is Jesus. And in following him, we are given his name - his meaning, his identity, his destiny. Amen!