

**Sermon prepared by The Rev. Charles Rowins for St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, Sunday, January 13, 2019.**

We remember this morning the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. John is the baptizer. His task is to remind people that the Lord is with them in this life and the next, and that soon they will be visited by the Lord Himself in the person of the Messiah. Among those present that day was Jesus, and, as he was baptized, “a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

It is not clear from Luke’s Gospel (**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**) whether anyone but Jesus heard this message. But, he heard it, and thank God for that.

What follows in the gospel is Jesus being led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where he is tempted. We don’t hear from John the Baptist again. It’s as if his task is completed and he leaves the stage. Jesus is now the focus of attention.

My guess is that, at the baptism, John understood that he was in the presence of the Messiah. If so, what a thrill for this man who had spent his adult life preparing people for this arrival. John had a role to play in this real-life drama, and he played it well. But now Jesus takes center stage. And, as we believe, he will play his role to perfection and to our Salvation.

Which leads me to ask, “What is our role in this real-life drama?” Do we merely observe, applaud as appropriate, and then leave the theatre? Or do we climb on stage and accept a more active role, not knowing what this engagement might mean for us?

This morning’s Collect speaks of our responsibility as those who are baptized to “boldly confess him as Lord and Savior.” Can’t you just hear the director, as we timidly confess Jesus as Lord and Savior, shout, “No, no, no! Not timidly, but boldly. He’s your Lord and Savior, after all. Let the audience hear you!”

The Prophet Isaiah (**Isaiah 43:1-7**) tells us not to be afraid of this on-stage role. “Now thus says the Lord, ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine .... when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame will not consume you.” In other words, “Go for it. Speak up. I am right with you.”

Easy for Isaiah to say. I’m still scared, though. So, what does **Psalm 29** have to say about all this? “The Lord shall give strength to his people; the Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace.”

The Lesson from the Acts of the Apostles (**Acts 8:14-17**) echoes this assurance. “Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.”

Okay, okay, okay. I believe ... but I’m not really comfortable on stage. I get frightened. No matter what assurances I get from the director or my fellow actors, center stage is not for me. Can I just be in the chorus? Can I just be a stagehand? Can I just make posters or sell tickets or clean the theatre? I’ll do anything. I just can’t handle center stage.

And do you know what we hear when we offer what we can? We hear the same voice that Jesus heard: “You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Our stage is not the Universe. It’s not Planet Earth. It’s not beyond our means. It’s something more modest. It is something within our reach. At least, it is within our reach, if we stretch.

And here is the key to our Faith: spiritual stretching. And it’s a two-way stretch. God reaches out to us. And we reach out to God. This instinct to join hands with our Creator is not an accident. It is what God intends. It is what Michelangelo conveys on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. God reaching and man reaching. Fingers nearly touching.

And what is in this meeting for us? Salvation, that’s what. God wants to rescue us. That’s the whole point of Jesus. And it was the whole point of those who proclaimed that a Messiah was on the way. And it was the whole point of those who proclaimed that the Messiah had arrived.

And, guess what. It is the whole point of what we do when we worship together. “Our Father, who art in heaven” is our response to “Let us now offer the prayer which our Lord taught us.” We didn’t invent this prayer. It was extended to us. It

was God in Christ teaching and reaching. And our acceptance of this invitation is our reaching. And don't we feel just a bit better when that intersection occurs?

The Lord's Prayer is just one illustration of a Divine stretch meeting a human stretch. There are many such meetings, some of which are unique to you. Think of the epiphanies that are shared at announcement time. Something clicked. Something came together. Something clarified. Our search encountered God's search. Maybe God reached first. Maybe we did. The sequence is not the point though. The point is that it happens.

The sacraments of the Church are reminders of these meetings. The water of baptism and the bread and wine of communion are vehicles of engagement. At communion we are offered a wafer and a sip of wine. And when we consume these gifts, we feel better. Not because of the taste, but because of the exchange with a God who calls us Beloved.

Remember this verse from Luke's gospel: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove."

A Divine stretch. A helping hand. And more than a helping hand. More to the point, a saving hand if this Jesus, one of us, accepted this assignment. And accept it he did, all the way to the Cross. An instrument of death that led to new life. And, of course, by design, an instrument in the shape of an intersection. In this case, an intersection of God and man.

Let's go back to our friend with stage-fright. Maybe us. And let's go back to all the alternative ways to play a role. Not just on center-stage, but back-stage. When the curtain goes down and applause breaks out, and the curtain goes back up and more applause takes place, we feel proud, don't we, whatever our role in the production.

And, even if there is no encore, we're still proud of our involvement. So what, if it didn't get rave reviews. We gave it our best. We were involved. That performance touched us and we touched it. We learned from that performance. We're better because of that performance. And it touched us back. There was a connection.

Remember that the critics didn't give Jesus a great review. He died. The performance was awful. But God would change that assessment in a matter of days. Jesus would rise from the dead, and the drama would be picked up by companies of believers all around the world and over many centuries. There's a company of believers right here. For you and me, Jesus lives, and we are a part of the life. Different roles, but the same Lord, with the same message: "You are my Beloved."

Amen.