



**The Anglican Church of
St. John the Baptist, Cobble Hill**

The First Sunday after the Epiphany ~ Year A

Text: *Isaiah 42.1-9*

Homily given at 8:00 am & 9.15 am

on Sunday January 9th, 2011,

at St. John's, Cobble Hill, BC

by

Rev. Dr. David J. Rolfe

'The Baptism of our Lord'

At a Baptism, I asked a 9 year old girl the question, "Do you desire to be Baptized?" She answered loud and clear, "Oh, YES PLEASE!" A sigh of appreciation came from the congregation. Baptism is a voluntary life pledge, a loving covenant between a person and God. You and I say, 'yes', God opens the door to us welcomes us in, and lovingly invites us to work with Jesus to make the vow become a way of living.

Let's look at God's part in Baptism. This can be a very difficult study because it hinges on how you and I perceive God, not just in our thoughts, but in our hearts, our dreams, in hidden memories, when we are at our best, when we are at our worst. Who God is, what God is like, where God abides – all these partial pictures, accurate or twisted, slowly accumulate in our hearts, whether we want this or not. Consider how some TV evangelists show forth God. Speaking rather quickly they tell us how much God loves us, that 'the end' - the apocalypse is coming soon, if you don't give your life to Christ NOW, you may be too late for salvation, you will be left out, you will burn in hell for all eternity. I totally reject this portrayal of God. I hope you do too.

It is like a parent saying to a child, "Give me a hug and a kiss, and tell me how much you love me, and how lucky you are to have me as your Dad. If you don't I'll thrash you with the buckle end of my belt." In any human context, we would quickly see this not as awesome, but as abuse. The gritty part of this portrayal of God is that most of us have been infected with this to a greater or lesser degree. Our emotional view of God surfaces every now and then and can surprise us by its intensity and its bias. If this picture of the way some of us perceive God has made you uncomfortable, recognize the infection, and ask God to help you gently wash it out of your heart. All of us need to be most kind and patient with those of us who have grown up with a father who was absent, or abusive in some way. Such a childhood experience can make hearing God labeled 'Father' a trigger that re-awakens so much confusion and pain. Jesus said, 'Learn what this means: it's kindness I want.' [Matthew 9.13]





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We have heard it said that ‘Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’ [Prov1.7; Psalm 111.10] It is. Is this fear like that one feels when confronted by a thug who demands our valuables – or else? Is it like the fear we feel when smoke billows into a packed building and someone yells ‘fire!’ I do not believe this is the same ‘fear’ as that which leads to wisdom.

Imagine a courier comes to your door, and hands you a Registered Letter. You open the envelope to find an invitation to you – from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, inviting you as the one ordinary person who will represent Canada at the wedding of Prince William and Katherine. You will be a guest at Buckingham Palace. The feeling you have is not fear of death or violence, it is fear of making a mistake, a sense of being inadequate for the task. This is awe and respect mixed with humility. To my mind this is what is intended in that phrase, ‘Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’

I want to believe that the little girl who said, “Oh yes please!” to Baptism was going towards the God we see so clearly presented in today’s readings. Isaiah the prophet speaks one of the ‘Servant Songs’, proclaiming forth the character of God’s chosen servant. The one Jesus identified himself as being. [Luke 4.16-20] *The one who does not break a broken reed.* In Isaiah’s day, Jesus’ day, in Europe until the 19th century, reeds were used for so many lowly domestic things: thrown on floors to cover over filth, used to thatch roofs and so forth. This passage tells of God working through his chosen one; a God who is so gentle he doesn’t even break off a broken reed. Instead of throwing away a flickering lamp, he trims the wick so that it can bring light. Perhaps like me, you also hear echoes of Isaiah when Jesus tells people, “Aren’t five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one sparrow is forgotten by God....you are worth much more than many sparrows.” [Luke 12.6-7]

Today, we listened as John the Baptist said to Jesus, “I ought to be baptized by you, and yet you have come to me.” Jesus replied, “Let it be so for now. For in this way we shall do all that God requires.” [Matt. 3-13-17] This is picked up by the writer to the Hebrews who wrote, ‘Jesus had to become in every way like his brothers and sisters.’ He suffered in every way that we do, he knew what we face in life, and yet did not turn his back on God. ‘And now he can help those who are tempted, because he himself was tempted and suffered.’ [Heb. 2.17-18] If you want a modern analogy of this, watch the TV show, ‘Undercover Boss’ in which the CEO of a nationwide business goes undercover and poses as someone who has applied for an entry-level job at one of that corporation’s outlets. The boss, when he later reveals his identity always tells of being amazed at the dedication of his employees and of the hardships they endure in life. She talks of her personal experience, working ‘in the trenches’ of





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being humbled, and of gaining a deep appreciation for the lives of those who work for her. The boss talks of being forever changed by the experience. I believe in my heart that Jesus went through all he endured living like we do, and as a result has a deep, deep abiding empathy for what it is to be just a human. More and more we are told that the best way to be a follower of Jesus is to live motivated by gratitude.

Jesus invites you and me to follow him, through the waters of Baptism not out of fear or guilt, but out of love, living kindness, seeing everyone as neighbour, setting aside me first attitudes and actions, going gladly on that second mile with someone who is on a hard road. Remember, you and I are bruised reeds that have not been broken but handled gently instead. The Suffering Servant opened our eyes, and has set us free from the dark prisons into which we had fallen. He shows that God does not shout at us, or raise his voice. God created all that is, he will never lose hope or courage; he gives life and breath to all people. Truly, our God is an awesome God.

Amen.

Rev. Dr. David J. Rolfe

