

The Rev. Frank F. Wilson  
St. Timothy's Episcopal Church  
January 10, 2021

**First Sunday After Epiphany, Year 'B' [RCL]:** Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

**Title:** Consider Yourself Duly Commissioned

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There are moments in our lives that stand out for us. Times we never forget. The memories of them are burned into the memory banks of our brains.

For example, depending on our age, many can recount exactly where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news that John F. Kennedy had been shot.

The same thing is true of the time and place we were when we first heard of the events of 9/11/2001.

Other memories are of less universal consequence, but rather are memories that are deeply personal, memories that occupy special places in the stories that are our lives. Maybe they are childhood memories. Maybe they are pleasant memories such as the first time we laid eye on he or she who would become our beloved. Maybe they are memories of an unpleasant sort - but deeply significant moments that have a shaping effect on our lives nonetheless.

My friend and theologian Don Armentrout called such events our 'charter stories.' They are *defining* moments. They are moments in our lives which indeed, in some way, contribute to defining who we are, how we view or interact with the world, how we understand even the meaning of life.

And these are moments which can sometimes compel us to seek our spiritual roots. [*our houses of worship - either in celebration, in thanksgiving, or maybe as a place of solace and comfort*].

The text this morning here on the First Sunday after Epiphany is such a story. A charter moment, if you will have it, in the life of Jesus and thus in the life of the church – and indeed in our individual lives as well.

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not spend any time trying to explain why Jesus (who, after all, was without sin) felt the need to be baptized -- just that Jesus was, in fact, baptized at the hand of his cousin, John.

But Mark does share with us what Jesus saw that day, in that moment: Mark tells us that what Jesus saw was the heavens being torn apart and the Spirit of God descending on him like a dove. And he heard the voice of God saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Now if there is a more dramatic moment, a more significant moment, in all of the Bible, I'm not quite sure I know what or where it is.

Don't miss it that "the heavens are torn apart" and God's voice crosses that great divide separating heaven and earth; God's voice emanating through this crack in the heavens declaring the Sonship of Jesus. It's not clear whether anyone but Jesus heard God in that moment, but it is clear that Jesus heard God's voice in a most powerful and quite dramatic way.

This is no minor moment in the Gospel story, the life of Jesus, or indeed in the history of the world. This event, Jesus' baptism, is something of an inaugural event in the life of Jesus and for his ministry. We might even be tempted to say that it represented his "ordination."

That is, we know from accounts of Jesus' life following his baptism that he clearly saw his baptism as a type of commissioning – a commissioning to begin his ministry of teaching, healing, and serving. There is no indication anywhere in the Gospel that before his baptism that more than a few, outside of his immediate family, had ever heard of Jesus of Nazareth.

But after his baptism. Oh, after this moment, Jesus' ministry is in full gear. After his immersion in the Jordan at the hands of John, Jesus came up out of those waters focused on who God had called him to be and to be about the work that his Father in heaven had called him to.

Whatever conclusions one might reach about why Jesus submitted to baptism; it is clear that baptism was a defining moment in his life. Jesus' life was changed; was energized and animated as a consequence of his baptism. Jesus' sense of who he was clearly was different as he emerged from the living waters of the river Jordan. He was one person going into the river and different person emerging from it.

And so it is with each one of us.

The water of baptism submerges one life and gives birth to another. It drowns the old self and raises up the new.

In a unique, peculiar, special, and even mysterious way our baptism informs us as to who we are. So it was with the Son of Man and it so it is with us.

A scene from the movie *Roots* comes to mind. Maybe you remember it? It is early on in the story. The tribe that was the community in which Kuntat Kinte was born and which nurtured him, has a ritual revolving around the newborn called The Eight Day Ritual. In this scene, a father gives his newborn son his name and thus makes him a member of the tribe. In the culture of Western Africa, the name given a child is both a gift and a challenge.

Omorro, for that is the father's name, lifts the infant, and as all watch, he whispers three times into his baby son's ear the name he has chosen for him. Kunta Kinte. Kunta Kinte. Kunta Kinte. It was the first time the name had ever been spoken. In this native culture it was felt that each human has the right to be the first to hear his or her own name; to know who she or he is.....

That night the father completed the ceremony. Out under the moon and the stars, but alone this time with his son, on the eighth night, the father completed the naming ritual. Carrying little Kunta Kinte in his huge arms, he walks out to the edge of the village into a clearing and lifting the baby face-up towards the heavens he says, "Behold the only thing greater than yourself."

Baptism tells us who we are.

At our baptism we are inaugurated, we are commissioned, we are grafted into, we are welcomed into the Kingdom of God. And if we are an infant, we too are given our name.

But in these stories, we are reminded that baptism is both a welcoming and a commissioning. To be welcomed into the Kingdom is also to be commissioned to do certain things and to become a certain kind of person. Baptism is both a gift and a task. Like the tribe of Omorro and Kunta Kinte, we recognize that to be brought into the community -- even and especially the community of the Kingdom of God -- is both a gift and a challenge. A gift and a privilege. A gift and an embracing of the new person who emerges from the waters of his or her baptism.

Let us be reminded of that which we embrace at our Baptism.

Let us be reminded of the moment when we first publically renounced Satan and all that Satan represents and professed reliance on Christ's love and grace...

Let us be reminded of the vows we have made. That is to say, the professed intention to stay connected to our roots -- our spiritual roots.

Let us be reminded of the persons we have declared that we will strive to be as we emerged from the waters of our own baptism.

Baptism takes place in a moment -- a 'defining' moment', a 'charter moment' if you will, but a moment none-the-less. Living into our baptism, on the other hand, is a lifetime endeavor.

Our baptism is part of our personal charter story. It is foundational to who we are and to who we strive to become. And it is forever a kind of 'becoming.'

But we do not go it alone. We dare not try. For we could not do it alone. It would be impossible to do it alone. We do it, dear ones, by and through the grace of God Almighty.

And as we take this journey through life it is helpful from time to time to return to our roots. It helps to re-focus and to be reminded of who and whose we are.

Had we been able to gather this morning as the community of faith, I think that I would have had us renew our baptismal vows; affirm what we vowed, or our sponsors vowed on our behalf if we were too young to speak for ourselves. At our baptism there are but six questions asked of the one being baptized but they can be summarized into two affirmations: (1) we renounce evil and all desires that would draw us away from the love of God, and (2) we vow to put our whole trust in God's grace, love, and ways.

But let us do this this morning. Let us affirm that which we embraced at the time of our baptism. Let us do so in our hearts. Let us do this in our everyday. Let us do this knowing that when the world embraces God and God's intentions for us - when all of God's children renounce selfishness and violence in favor of the God-inspired peace that binds us together in the common good - and when all of God's children come together trusting in God's ways and God's love we will then be well on our way to transforming this world into the Peaceable Kingdom; God's Kingdom -- not only in heaven but right here on this earth.

Amen.