

“A Voice from the Balcony”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRode
The First Sunday after Epiphany
The Baptism of the Lord Sunday
Sunday, January 10, 2010
Scripture: Luke 3:15-17; 21-22

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Lord Jesus, open our eyes to your miraculous intrusions among us, your uncontrollable, unexpected, and sometimes even unsought healing work within us. And, then, Lord, give us the courage and faith to welcome your authority. Amen.*

Do you remember that old saying, “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me”? Well guess what. It isn’t true. We have all learned, I am sure, that the child who is told that she is smart will perform much better than a child who is continually told she is not smart. We have also all read, that the behavior of a child who is told he is bad will be worse than a child who is told he is good. Now, I don’t know why that is, but I know that it is true. And it doesn’t stop in childhood. We all have tapes of what I have heard referred to as “voices from the cellar”.

We first learned about those cellar influences primarily from Freud. The way I understand him, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s true, is that if we could access the tapes which replay in each of our minds, we would hear some of those names and comments from our childhood. And, it’s the replaying of the tapes of those cellar voices which erode our self-confidence by reminding us of our weaknesses and failures. And because it is people around us who tell us who we are, it is also through those voices from the cellar which define, not only who we are, but what we can do.

It reminds me of a story I heard once. Once there was a man who was very interested in birds. He would travel through the forest and seek birds which interested him. One day, he

caught a young eagle, brought it home, and put it among the chickens, ducks and turkeys which lived on his farm. Even though it was an eagle – the king of birds – he gave it chicken food.

Five years later, a naturalist came to see him and, after passing through the garden, said: “That bird is an eagle, not a chicken.”

“Yes,” said the owner, “but I have trained it to be a chicken. It is no longer an eagle, it is a chicken, even though it measures fifteen feet from tip to tip of its wings.”

“No,” said the naturalist, “It is an eagle still. And it has the heart of an eagle. Furthermore, I will make it soar high up to the heavens.”

“No,” said the owner, “it is a chicken and it will never fly”.

They agreed to test it. The naturalist picked up the eagle, held it up; and said with great intensity: “Eagle, thou art an eagle, thou dost belong to the sky and not to this earth; stretch forth thy wings and fly.”

The eagle turned this way and that, and looking down, saw the chickens eating their food, and down he jumped.

The owner said: “See, I told you it was a chicken.”

“No” asserted the naturalist, “it is an eagle, and it has the heart of an eagle, only give it one more chance, and I will make it fly tomorrow.”

The next morning he rose early and took the eagle outside the city and away from the houses, to the foot of a high mountain. The sun was just rising, gilding the top of the mountain with gold, and every crag was glistening in the joy of the beautiful morning. He picked up the eagle and said to it: “Eagle, thou art an eagle: thou dost belong to the sky and not to the earth; stretch forth thy wings and fly.”

The eagle looked around and trembled as if new life were coming to it. Yet it did not fly. The naturalist made it look straight at the

sun. Suddenly it stretched out its wings, and with the screech of an eagle, it mounted higher and higher and never returned. It was an eagle, even though it had been kept and tamed as a chicken.

Wow! No I don’t know for sure if that story is true, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it were. If you tell anyone long enough that he is a chicken, he will believe you. But...when suddenly there is a voice from the balcony which speaks much louder and with more authority than the voices in the barnyard, or in the cellar, the eagle will fly.

Probably the times when voices are the most influential are those times when we are in the midst of moving from one phase to another. And our lives are full of transitions and new beginnings, aren’t they? There are graduations, new jobs, new relationships, marriages, new babies, confirmations, divorces, and retirements. And at each and every one of those transitions and new beginnings, the key question we ask ourselves is, “Who am I now? I’m not the person I was before. Who am I now in this new beginning?”

In this season of Epiphany, we look at those special events in Jesus’ life where his presence was especially manifested with power. Jesus’ baptism is one of those epiphanies. We heard Luke’s version of that event a little bit ago. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form as a dove, and a voice came from heaven saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

While all four gospel writers share this story, Luke’s version is a little different from the others. While all four speak of the Holy Spirit as a dove, Luke is the only writer who tells us that the Spirit came upon Jesus when he was alone. The other writers imply that the Spirit descended upon his baptism, apparently when he was still in the water. Luke tells us that the heaven opened and the Spirit descended after Jesus’ baptism,

while he was praying. Luke tells us that the Spirit came to Jesus gently, quietly, and privately.

Luke, more than any other gospel, emphasizes that Jesus prayed. Jesus went off by himself to pray. Several times Luke says things like, “He left the crowds and went off by himself to pray,” or “He left his disciples and went off by himself to pray.” I think Luke emphasizes these “alone” times of Jesus to get our attention. When Jesus prayed, something happened, especially at those critical points in his life, when he was facing a crisis, or a decision, or a time of doubt, or questions. It was at those times – time when he allowed himself some downtime – times when he prayed – that there were epiphanies, special manifestations of God, just like the one at his baptism, which we heard this morning. And I believe they were the same every time. He received his identity, “You are my Son,” and regained his power and vision for his life, through the Spirit.

Luke is writing his gospel for Christians, those who have been baptized. He is telling the, and us, that our baptism means the same as Jesus’ baptism. You are God’s daughter, or God’s son, and with you God is well pleased. And, my friends, isn’t that something we need to hear over and over in our lives, especially when we come to a crossroad or change in our lives?

Here Jesus is about to begin his Messiahship and perhaps he is at the place where he was questioning the rightness of his direction. It was the time to ask the question, “Who am I now in this new beginning?” And the answer came to him – not publicly, but privately – when he was talking to his Father alone, “You are my son, in whom I am well pleased”.

These happenings – each time that Jesus is affirmed of his identity – assure us that Jesus was unlike anyone else who has ever lived. And yet, Jesus, the incarnate God, though unlike

any of us, is like all of us. His specialness is, of course, that he is God’s only begotten Son. But, on a human level, each of us is like everybody else and like nobody else. There is not a human being in the world, in whatever condition, who is not somewhat like you and me in loves and loyalties, hopes and fears. And yet, God confirms in us, as He did with Jesus, that you are like nobody else who ever was. You are His special child.

Each and everyone of us is special – so special, in fact, and I really want you to hear this, that each and every one of us is so special that if you were the only person in the universe who responded, God would still consider the incarnation, the crucifixion and the resurrection worthwhile. WOW what a thought!!!

As you begin a new passage in your life, no matter what that passage is, people around you tell you who you are. Some of those people read tapes of voices from long ago. Sometimes those people are sitting in the balcony and give your positive messages but some of those people are sitting in the cellar and give you negative messages.

Friends, I truly believe that the message Luke wants us to take with us today is that no matter what those cellar voices say, we are to listen, instead, to the Voice from the balcony. Sometimes that voice isn’t very loud. Sometimes, it is a “still, small voice”. Sometimes God speaks to us through other people. Sometimes he speaks to us when we are praying – if we allow as much time to listen as we do to speak.

We have been created in the image of God. The voices in the cellar try to make us think we are chickens, so sometimes we think we are. BUT...we are eagles. “Stretch forth your wings and fly. Listen to that voice from the balcony – the voice of God saying to you, “You are my child, in whom I am well pleased.”

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

Thanks to: the unknown source of the story of the eagle who thought it was a chicken, and Mark Trotter for his sermon, “Have You Got a Prayer?”

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