

I CHOOSE YOU

Matthew 3: 13-17

Acts 8: 4-13

[Epiphany 2, January 15, 2014, Augsburg College Chapel]

Just over a year ago, Abigail, Thomas, Maya and I were in Vietnam, taking Thomas back to his birthplace and meeting his birth mother. It was there where we had first traveled in 2001 to adopt Thomas and we reminisced again about our exciting adventure – especially the moment when we received our children at the orphanage.

Imagine this situation – five families gathered in a conference room, brief speeches, food is served, and all of a sudden five children are carried out from the back room, there ensues this remarkable cacophony of screaming and crying and picture-taking – and then we are off, loaded into vans and on our way back to our lives, changed forever by what happened in that orphanage.

This scene, it seems to me, is a glimpse of what happens to all of us in our baptism: a ceremony, cacophony, and our lives are changed forever – it is this wondrous moment of transformation, of being claimed and named, of becoming part of a new family, of receiving the greatest gift we could ever imagine to receive.

I am intrigued by the notion that what happens to each of us in our baptism is that we are adopted – we are chosen by God to be God's child, to become a part of God's family, to hear what God says about his son, Jesus, in our gospel this morning – this is my child with whom I am well pleased, whom I love beyond measure – rejoice with me!

Consider with me, if you will, what we might learn from the experience of adopting a child that can help illumine our experience of baptism, of being adopted by God – what sort of parent adopts, what sort of child is adopted, how is the world changed by adoptive families?

Our scripture for this morning is a wonderful reminder of the important themes of the Epiphany season, the liturgical time when we reflect on and celebrate the fact that our God broke into our world, came to live among us, and proclaimed the message of redeeming grace to all who believe and are baptized...

One of the most striking aspects of the process of adoption is the requirement of adoptive parents to be very intentional and deliberate about the decision to adopt a child – paperwork and essays, government requirements, major investments of time and energy are required to pass muster and be given permission to adopt. I wonder what would happen if all parents were required to say out loud to the world: this is why I want to have a child, to be a family!

The Holy Scriptures tell us a good bit about the character of our God, our adoptive parent. God our Creator is intentional about wanting to adopt us. God says out loud: you are mine and here is what you can expect from me as your parent - this is why I choose you, and here is what I hope you will do (and not do!), and here is what the future holds. As the Samaritans experienced with Philip's ministry in their midst – there will be healing and miracles and great joy! I want to have a family, God tells us through the scriptures and the work of his faithful community – I promise to

love and care for you, my adopted child. There will be great joy in your lives because you have been chosen!

Another important part of adopting a child is the act of giving the child a name, an identity symbolized by the name we are called. For Abigail and me, the choice of a name for our children was a source of meaningful prayer and discussion. Thomas already had a name – and we changed his name to Thomas. In those first moments in the orphanage, we called to him alternatively as Thuong and Thomas. We choose you, Thuong, we said, to be our beloved son. We name you Thomas, a name that has special meaning to us, so that you shall know how much we love you, forever and ever. You are ours, forever and ever. Welcome home, Thomas. [All of us are welcomed each and every time our name is spoken – Sonja, Justin, Barb, welcome home, I love you].

As the gospel of Matthew so poignantly reminds us, baptism is God's way of offering his adopted children the blessing of their name, their identity as those chosen, those beloved. To receive the blessing of a name is to hear the voice of your parent say, "My son, my daughter, welcome home, I am pleased with you." That is what our God did for Jesus as he began his ministry in the world – baptized by his cousin, John, Jesus receives the blessing of his Father, the blessing of an identity, of a mission in the world. I choose you, God says. I love you, God promises.

As you might imagine, the six hour trip back to Saigon with our new families was an adventure that none of us will ever forget – an old world had been put aside and a new world created for each of us, our lives had been changed forever, by this child who was now ours to hold and care for and love, no matter what! And the adventure continues for each of us who are part of an adoption...

The poet, WH Auden, writes in his wonderful Christmas prose-poem, "For the Time Being," about what it is like when Christmas is over. He says:

“Well, so that is that.
Now, we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—
Some have gotten broken—and carrying them up to the attic...
To those who have seen The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.
For the innocent children who whispered so excitedly
Outside the locked door where they knew the presents to be
Grew up when it was opened...
In the meantime
There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
From insignificance.”

As we move now into Epiphany, this time after Christmas, this 'time being', we have the gift of baptism, the gift of adoption, to help us know how to redeem the time being from insignificance. And so I conclude with another baptism story. Our youngest, Maya, was surrounded by family and friends at her baptism, including her older brother, Thomas. As my dad baptized her in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, spilling the ceremonial water over her head, Maya let out

a great cry, and her brother, always quick to get a word in, shouted out for the entire congregation to hear, "Maya, shake it off like a dog." As much as we might like to shake off the role of faith in our lives, it is, of course, impossible to do, but that doesn't mean we don't try...

I choose you, God tells us – as he told his Son on the banks of the Jordan River some 2000 years ago, as he told those early faithful in Samaria – I choose you and nothing will ever be the same again. Thanks be to God. Amen.