

Sermon - Epiphany 1 – St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn

Baptism of Our Lord

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

One of the hardest theological questions to answer is ‘who is God?’ It is a foundational question for us Christians to grapple with as well as for Muslims and Jews, who share this Abrahamic faith foundation. Many theologians have explored this question and many visual artists have explored through illustration the question of who God is?

The key issue revolves around how God is revealed to the world and the Christian notion of God’s desire to be made known to the world through both nature and human history. 20th c Swiss theologian Emil Brunner proposes that such revelation is a personal communication from God, that is to say a personal presence of God is experienced in the believer. His theory was that revelation by God was strongly relational between God and person. God is to be experienced as a person rather than an object. The goal of relational revelation is the formation of a mutual relationship between the revealing God and humanity.

Many people hold a fairly basic understanding of God, developed largely through early childhood religious education. It is hard to teach children complex theological ideas so simple concepts and images are often used. Some of these images of God were largely based on the artwork of the renaissance painters who often painted God as an old white guy, sitting on a throne in heaven. Michelangelo’s painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel is telling. A young earth-bound Adam stretches his hand out with pointed finger to almost connect with the finger of God, depicted as a bearded old man in the heavenly realm.

God has variously been described as a supernatural being, energy, light, spirit, and father. Invariably there is a qualifier added to the end of the description. In most cases we are projecting our limited experience of God back on God. When God is likened to a father, we say but not a human father who goes to work to earn a living, plays sports and the like. Indeed we might also see a father as judgmental and harsh if we mess up. We might say God has fatherly characteristics like strength, is a provider and a patriarch. So we are able to understand some of God’s characteristics but the name ‘God’ means many things to many people.

As part of the relational experience, we seek to name God, to give God identity. It has been somewhat difficult to name God, unlike the ease we have in naming our child. Our limitation is largely due to our linguistic capabilities. When God appeared to Moses out of the flaming bush, Moses expressed his anxiety at having to explain to the Israelites who God was. In Exodus Chapter 3 Moses asks God for God’s name so he can tell the Israelites. God says “I AM WHO I AM You shall tell the Israelites I AM has sent you.” God then expands this by telling Moses to say God is, “The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God is Isaac and the God of Jacob.”

We might well ask, “What’s in a name, especially a name like I AM?” Well I would say a lot, especially as it relates to identity and intimacy. In modern times our parents at or shortly after birth give us a name. Some names are determined before birth due to family customs such as naming the eldest son after the father, or a daughter after her Grandmother. Some parents prefer to meet their newborn before giving them a name, wanting to understand more of the personality of the baby.

In a number of religions we have ritualized the naming of children. In Judaism, a male child is named at the bris, the ceremony of the covenant of circumcision for boys. I recently watched a Netflix series called *Shtisel*, about an ultra orthodox family in Jerusalem. There was one storyline where the father of a baby answered a newspaper ad placed by a wealthy widow wanting to pay for a family to name their child after her deceased husband so as to memorialize his name because they had no children. The child’s mother refused but at the bris the father named the child for the widow’s husband so he could get the money she promised. The mother was not pleased.

In our own faith, there is the presentation section of the Rite of Christian Baptism where the parents and godparents present the child by name. Then when the priest baptizes the person they are again named, immersed in water and then baptized in the name of God in Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The intertwining of the name of the baptized with the name of God in this sacrament signals the closeness God seeks with God’s people.

When I was a hospital chaplain after I finished seminary I worked at the Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital of New York, a part of Columbia Medical Center. I was assigned to work in the Neonatal ICU and the Ante Partum unit where mothers with high-risk pregnancies would stay. Many babies died in that unit especially those born very premature and those that died in utero. We would always encourage parents to name their deceased children even if they died before viability at 24 weeks.

Naming of babies that die is an important part of grieving as it allows the parents, siblings and grandparents to honor the lost life and to draw closer to the memory of the life so shortly lived. The ritual of naming a deceased baby allows for a level of intimacy akin to that which may normally exist with a baby that survived birth. It is a very important acknowledgment. So names and naming rituals are an integral part of our human existence and also our existence intertwined with the God of our creation.

In the passage of scripture from Isaiah today we hear his beautiful description of the promise of God to gather the people of the Jewish diaspora back to Jerusalem. “Do not fear for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine.” “I will be with you,” God says. You will not be overwhelmed. “I am your savior,” “you are precious” and I love you. Do not fear, God says, I will gather you in. Everyone is part of this promise.

There is an incredible sense of intimacy that the Lord is articulating through his prophet Isaiah. By calling each person by name God was seeking to be closer to them so that they might come together into a community of faith “like a hen gathers her chicks under her wings,” the apostle Matthew says. This is God’s desire for us as well.

God demonstrates to all people a desire to be a close and intimate God, rather than a distant and remote God that is so often portrayed for us in the images of the old white man with a beard sitting on a cloud somewhere. God seeks our belief by revealing God's self to us at all stages of our life, especially in times of trouble and grief.

In baptism we are united to Jesus Christ, the incarnate of God, and we have the spirit of God sealed within us. This sacrament of the church is a vital initiation into a life of faith in Jesus, the most powerful revelation of God to us. This ritual was so important to Jesus that he submitted to baptism by John in the Jordan, even though he was without sin and was the Son of God.

If we listened carefully to the gospel we would have heard that John baptized Jesus after all the people had been baptized. It is an important detail to note because Jesus was being baptized into a community of baptized people so they could all relate to one another. We too are baptized into a community of baptized people and together we are charged with the spiritual care and development of the newly baptized.

In this ancient ritual, God as Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit comes close to us and we become one with God, and with the community that is the body of Christ. Jesus came into the world to be united to the lowly and to uplift victims rather than to feast only with the elite. Jesus died on the cross alone, a victim of a threatened people and a threatened state, but still he was connected to his Father until his last breath. We also are not left alone in this world as God is with us, at all times and in all places.

Today we remember the ritual baptism of Jesus and the beginning of his ministry on this earth. In a moment we will renew our baptismal vows as a way of reconnecting with our own baptism and that of Jesus and all the baptisms of faithful men and women down through the ages. God seeks a close and intimate relationship with us like no other. This intimacy comes from God knowing our names, calling us by name and understanding us more than we understand ourselves.

As we get to know each other over these next few months my own challenge is to learn your names as the first step in our relationship. You all know that my name is Andrew. I would like to get to know you but first I need to know your name. Sometime I feel my head has a hollow pipe between my ears as names come in and seem to go out at the same time. So forgive me if I have to ask you more than once to tell me your name. It just means I'm interested in getting to know you.

May God bless you this day as we now turn to the words of our baptismal covenant.