

Christmas I Year A  
December 29, 2019  
Text: John 1:1-18  
Preached in Grace and Holy Trinity Church, Richmond  
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***May I speak to you in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.***

One of the many privileges and joys I experienced in serving Grace and Holy Trinity was the opportunity to lead last year's confirmation preparation course. Throughout the fall and into the spring of last year a committed group of adult mentors I met with a bright group of six young men and women who were preparing to affirm the baptismal vows that in most cases others helped make for them when they were infants. The format of our discussions was question and answer, and the idea was to encourage the group to come up with their own questions about God, faith, and the Church. As a starting point, we used the Catechism, what's also known as *An Outline of the Faith* found in the back of the Book of Common prayer. I remember one session in particular, when we entertained the question found on page 858, "What is Holy Baptism?"

Q. What is Holy Baptism?

A. Holy Baptism is the sacrament by which God **adopts us as his children** and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God.

I remember looking around the room filled with this bright group of teenagers and thinking about the irony of this particular question for them. Becoming a child through their Baptism and claiming childhood in God as their own through Confirmation seemed completely out of line with everything else they were learning from the culture they

inhabited. At home, at school, in their extra-curriculars, and yes—even here in church—everything that surrounded them was geared towards propelling them into adulthood, towards greater maturity, towards a greater capacity for reason, responsibility, and self-sufficiency. Affirming their Baptism—claiming childhood in God as their own through Confirmation—represented a radical departure from this trajectory.

In this moment it occurred to me just how radical the sacrament of Baptism is amidst a culture that is wholly oriented towards producing reasoning, rational, responsibility-bearing adults. This is so ingrained in our collective consciousness that when one of us missteps in our journey to adulthood we're likely to hear snide comments like, "stop acting like a child," or perhaps more bluntly, "grow up!" Maybe some of us have been on the receiving end of some of these jabs.

As adults we're no less uncomfortable thinking of ourselves as children or being called "children." Once we have made our way through the obstacles of adolescence, of higher education, through the ranks of our career paths, and perhaps having grown into a position of influence, power, or prestige, the notion of once again becoming "childlike" seems anathema! Once we've "figured out" how the world works and once we finally understand our place in it, what value lies in being "childlike?"

Thankfully today's Gospel reading from John gives us an answer.

*But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.*

Before we consider the costs and promises of reclaiming the childhood promised in our Baptism, it's helpful to think about what this passage might have meant to the early Christian community that first heard John's Gospel some 2000 years ago.

And here's where I'm going to make a plea for your patience—while I employ the knowledge and wisdom I've gained through completion of one whole semester of seminary!

John's Gospel was written in Ephesus—near modern day Turkey—around the years 80-90 AD. This was a time when Christians were experiencing a painful separation from the Jewish community they inhabited. Proclaiming Jesus Christ as Messiah resulted in persecution from the Pharisees—those who did so were kicked out of the synagogue, banished from participating in civil life, and became social pariahs. In this context John wrote his Gospel to support and inspire an early Christian community striving for discipleship in the face of hostility. The language, tone, and mood of John's Gospel—the last written of the four—is characterized by a greater sense of urgency and immediacy. While the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke profess that the gifts promised to the Children of God are available only at the end time, John's Gospel proclaims that eternal life and the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God are imminent and available to those who receive Jesus and believe in his name NOW. In this passage, the result of believing in Jesus as Messiah and Lord is described in past tense—"*But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.*"

For John's early Christian community, the significance of this past event—the giving of this power—continued into the present. Jesus—the Word made Flesh—broke into the human story and made eternal life an ongoing possibility! The incarnation of the Word brought a light to the world, a light that became a permanent part of the human story. Becoming Children of God was a process of growing into this eternal life, of drawing nearer to the very light that gave a sense of direction. Harnessing the power to become Children of God meant living into Christian discipleship *in the here and now* in the face of separation, hostility, conflict, and persecution. It meant being called out of the ways of the world and towards the Kingdom of God *on earth as it is in Heaven*. Growing into childhood meant believing in the possibility of a better world that cannot be created through human reason, knowledge, or invention, but through the Power of God alone. It meant fully believing that Jesus, the Messiah, came and lived and died and was resurrected and remains embodied within the human family here on earth!

### **Isn't this where we are today?**

We are mired in separation, division and conflict—aren't we? It's impossible to turn on your television, turn on the radio, or check your smartphone without being reminded of our fallen world. Even the most powerful institutions and leaders in our world—with the power of the greatest technology the world has ever seen—have proven incapable of healing the wounds we that we have inflicted upon one another through our own self-interest, pride and fear. What scares me the most is not the reality of our human nature and of our fallen world—*Jesus has got that!*—but that we—even in the

Church—have grown in our acceptance of this condition. Perhaps overwhelmed by division, conflict, and hostility, too often we've decided to batten down the hatches, circle the wagons, and do what we can to protect our own, ever hopeful for the promise the Kingdom of God in the life of the world to come—*but not necessarily here, not necessarily now, and probably not in our present circumstances*. I recently read an article from a news organization that claimed to report from a Christian perspective that summarized many of the challenges we face as a nation that ultimately concluded—and this is paraphrasing—that “As Christians we are called to live into the reality of our world.”

I believe that *nothing could be further from the truth*.

*”But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,”*

During my first week of classes in August term, one of my professors showed a clip from the movie version of C.S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* when the children return to the ruins of Narnia, a once splendid and mighty kingdom full of mystery, magic, and wonder. Bewildered, visibly disappointed, but undeterred, the children together begin to remember and recreate what was once majestic with their imaginations. “I imagine walls,” one of the children says, “and columns!...”and a glass room!” She goes on.

What struck me about this clip was how even as they walked amongst disordered ruins, the children had the power to envision a once mighty kingdom.

I believe this is a perfect illustration of what this morning's Gospel reading means when it tells us that all who received Jesus—all who believed in his name—are given power to become Children of God.

When we reclaim the power to become children of God we can become free to gaze in wonder at the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven—not at some point in the distant future, but right now, right here, in our time!

When we reclaim the power to become children of God we're able to surrender our illusions of control over the world that surrounds us.

It's only when we reclaim the power to become children of God that we can truly marvel at the divinity embodied in every human being regardless of what they believe, where they come from, what they look like, or who they love.

Only when we reclaim the power of becoming children of God can we begin to heal the wounds of our past as a country, commonwealth, city, family, and indeed those very wounds that belong to this Christian community.

It's only when we reclaim the power of becoming children of God that we are able to fully grow into our Baptismal promise of proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ by our words and by our lived example.

Only then will we be able to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Only then can we live fully into our promise to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being.

And it's only when we become children of God that we are fully prepared to receive the gifts of Christ made available to us in the sacrament of Holy Eucharist. So when you come forward for communion in just a few minutes, do so with the excitement and wonder of a child claiming his or her gifts on Christmas morning!

Thanks be to God.

This Christmas, I invite you to approach that which you fear with this same childlike wonder. Face the unknown with the courage to discover. Do all this assured by the promise that you are indeed a beautiful and beloved child of God.

**Amen.**