

Stanford Memorial Church
March 5, 2006

BEING SPECIAL
C. George Fitzgerald, S.T.D.

Old Testament: Genesis 9.8-17

New Testament: Mark 1.9-15

Today we observe the first of the six Sundays in Lent, the season which traditionally focuses on the life of Jesus. All four of the gospels agree that Jesus publicly initiated his ministry by joining throngs of men and women who traveled into the desert wilderness to receive a baptism of repentance and forgiveness—proclaimed and administered by John the Baptist. Not only does Jesus initiate his ministry with a ritual which becomes a universally significant sacrament in the Church, but—three years later—he concludes his ministry of teaching and healing in the same fashion. Although the Church has argued over the centuries about the meaning of a sacrament and how many there are—usually ranging from two to six—every branch of Christendom has consistently agreed on two fundamental sacraments: baptism and Eucharist, or the Lord’s Supper. They stand as bookends for the ministry of Jesus. One occurring at the outset of his ministry, while the other was initiated at the conclusion of his ministry, during his last meeting with his disciples, the night in which he was betrayed and then ultimately crucified.

When we place these two sacraments side by side, however, we cannot help but be struck by the very different way in which most of us have experienced them in our lives. We partake of the bread and wine of the Eucharist on a fairly regular basis, recognizing our need to be continually nurtured by God as well as affirming our fellowship as a community of faith. We come forward on our own accord. When we reflect on our participation in baptism, by way of contrast, it appears we function less like active participants and more like well-wishing observers. When a baptism is performed in a worship setting, we generally experience it as something happening to someone else. While an adult may occasionally be baptized, ordinarily parents present their delightful infants and charming young children.

Very few of us, unlike Jesus, decide in full adulthood to be baptized. If we were baptized as infants, the common practice in most mainline denominations, we certainly did not participate by choice, nor are we likely to have much of a memory of what happened. At times, I sometimes catch myself wondering whether or not I really was baptized, since no pictures remain of the occasion. The little certificate, if we had one, is long gone. Nor does my family possess a baptismal gown packed away for such traditional and significant moments. Indeed, if it should be determined that I was *not*

baptized, does this mean the heavenly clerks will decide my papers are not in order and push the “down” button?

To put it another way—we have been short-changed by our common practice of baptism. The normative experience, the promise given us, should be that which Jesus received. We present ourselves for baptism—like Jesus—thoughtfully and willingly. We make a public affirmation of faith. And, in return, we are blessed. We receive a divine declaration that we are special. According to the first three gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—when Jesus “came up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.’” (Mark 1.10&11). In the fourth account, the Gospel of John, it is John the Baptist who witnesses the rendering of the heavens, the descent of the Spirit and the divine declaration. This is the normative mode and model of baptism—an unforgettable, climactic moment. We are transformed and affirmed to the very depths of our being. It provided Jesus with the kind of certainty to enable him to be immediately led further into the desert wilderness—for forty days—and to resist the temptations of material abundance, incomparable power, and the promise of divinity itself. This affirmation and transformation is what baptism is all about.

Maybe you can more readily identify with the baptism of Jesus, because this was your experience as well. You looked up and saw the heavens parting, like vast curtains; the Spirit descended on you like a dove; and you hear a voice declaring “you are my Beloved, with you I am well pleased.” If this did happen to you, then John and I would like to talk to you after the service.

By shifting the focus of baptism to infants, children and young people, we do affirm that God’s love and grace reach out to us before we are even able to be aware of it. That’s good. That is a fundamental tenet of our faith and extremely important. But there is so much more; there is a greater heritage for us. If we content ourselves with the infant baptism model, we are, in effect, focusing on a prettily wrapped box, while neglecting, or failing to appreciate, the incredible content inside the box . . . that we are blessed . . . that we are Beloved . . . that we are special.

Perhaps the real question is: what does it mean to be “special?” One of the most effective ways to shed some light on this question is to recognize what being special does not mean.

For one thing, being “special” does not mean that we are declared the winner of a special spiritual oscar which we place on our little mantle of faith. This is the popular understanding of special: because I am “special,” I can look down on you and you can look up at me. But when Jesus was called “beloved,” there is no indication that he considered himself somehow more “special” or important than the other men and women who came out to be baptized by John the Baptist. Indeed, the waters of the River Jordan calls to mind the creation myths found in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis. Out of the vast waters God calls forth creation and, at the conclusion of his effort, declares that it is “good.” Life is essentially meant to be good, there is no sense of hierarchy, of superior and inferior. Life is treasured and valued as life. Being special does not mean being superior.

In the second place, being special does not mean that we have an exclusive contract with God. This is the very disturbing and dangerous error committed by the right-wing fundamentalists—of every major religious faith in the world today. While the assertion may take a variety of forms, the essential components are quite simple and distressing, and boils down to such convictions as: we have the truth and you are in error; God is on our side and not on yours; our God is right and yours is wrong; we will run the country according to our understanding of what God wants; we have a guaranteed pass to heaven and you are condemned to damnation. This blatant fallacy, with its false promise of providing security, seems so misguided and perverse—like saying that a loving parent selects one child out to special and destructively rejects all the others. Yet it persists in unabated fervor, currently ripping apart Iraq as well as a good many other countries, reminding us that no part of our global village is safe from the eruption of this blind fury. This is not what it means to be special. God does not bestow upon us an exclusive contract to the detriment and denial of the rest of God’s magnificent creation.

Nor, in the third place, being special does not mean that life will be a bowl of cherries. God does not promise that we will not have problems, nor disappointments, nor illnesses, nor death. It is hard to comprehend the tenacity of this misperception—since Jesus and almost every significant figure of faith in the Bible often experienced an inordinate degree of suffering—yet it persists. Because it is an understanding that defies reason and the biblical evidence, it can at times be quite frustrating and tragic. Within the hospital setting, for example, one of the most difficult situations to deal with is the patient and family, usually quite conservative in their religious beliefs, who labor under the conviction that if only they are unwavering in their faith and fervent in their prayers God will heal them. And if God does not heal them, then it must be their fault, and they must pray harder and believe without a shadow of a doubt. The fact that Jesus, immediately after his baptism, confronted deprivation and a grueling encounter with the false gods of materialism and power, that wreak havoc with faith, should make it evident that being special does not mean life will be a bowl of cherries.

Essentially, being special is not an end in and of itself, whether in terms of being superior, or have an exclusive contract with God, or living with the delusion that life will be a bowl of cherries. Rather it has to do with being special in relationship to. The operative phrase in the baptism of Jesus is “you are my son, my Beloved child.” Being special is being special in relation to God. We are accepted and we are empowered. It is a relationship that calls to mind the story of the Prodigal Son. As we know, when the wayward son turned his life around and returned home, he was given a royal welcome. It is an encounter beautifully captured in Rembrandt’s tender sketch of the son kneeling before his father and the father gently stroking the son’s head. But there is also the third person, the elder son who views the reunion with resentment and anger. He assumed he was special. He had not frittered away his gifts and goods in riotous living. He has been special . . . implying he had been superior. He assumed he had the exclusive relation with dad. He assumed, because of his goodness he should get the good things of life. And how does the father respond to the son’s resentful complaints? He simply says, “Son.”

This is part of what being special means: God does not give up on us. God remains through thick and thin. This experience of God's presence, comfort and care is what makes serving in the hospital so fulfilling and rewarding. Very few patients end up in the hospital by choice. If they had it their way, they would readily decline the experience—if they had a choice. But choice is not an option. And the questions like “why me?” and “what did I do wrong?” are frequently and understandably spoken. Then, over time, as patients struggle with their illness or injury, they become more attuned to a sense of not being alone. A spiritual sense of comfort and care becomes more evident. They say things like, “this is not something I would ever undergo willingly, nor would I wish it on anyone else, but in some strange way I have been enriched. I have a deeper sense of appreciation for life . . . of what is truly meaningful and important . . . I have not been cured, but I have experienced a caring, a comforting . . . and that has been a deeper kind of healing.” And if they do recover their health they quite frequently say such things as, “this was the most significant experience of my life . . . I would not trade it for anything.”

They have gained a true appreciation of what it means when God says, “You are special.”

Indeed how often this sense of being special to God seems to emerge in the most unlikely and seemingly tragic circumstances. Think, for example, of the composer Antonin Dvorak. At 35 years of age he began thinking about composing his *Stabat Mater*, a few days after his two-day-old daughter Josefa died. A year later his eleven month old daughter Auzena died, followed by his three-and-a-half year-old son Otakar, who died of smallpox, on Dvorak's thirty-sixth birthday. In his childless grief he took up the *Stabat Mater*, completing it two months after the death of his son. Minor keys are dominant in the first four sections of the *Stabat Mater*. But in the remaining portion major keys tend to prevail. And the *Stabat Mater* becomes a stirring reminder of the depths of being special in God's sight. Here stands an immortal expression of the depth of Dvorak's faith.

On this first Sunday in Lent, a time in which we traditionally reflect on the life and ministry of Jesus, it seems equally appropriate that we revisit baptism and its distinctive meaning for our life and ministry. We may recall once again that God's love ever proceeds us, calling us in care and compassion before we are even aware of the divine presence. We may once again discover the ways in which God assists in washing away all that impedes and detracts from our calling and fulfillment. And we may once again discern that in dying to self we are born to life eternal. That being special means being special for others—as God declares us special. In this way we too may be able to affirm the reality which Willa Cather stated so eloquently in *My Antonia*, “That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.” That is baptism, and that is what it means to be special. Amen.