

Suttons Bay Congregational Church

January 15, 2005

Mark 1:4-11

The Rev. Robin Long Sanderson

4And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 6John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Corey and I are both survivors of what is called an Ecclesiastical Council. It sounds like something straight out of a history book's chapter on the Spanish Inquisition—"The Pope set up an Ecclesiastical Council after which five priests were found guilty of heresy and burned at the stake." Thankfully, our Ecclesiastical Councils weren't that dramatic. An Ecclesiastical Council is an interview that a governing body of a church conducts with a person applying to be an ordained minister. My Ecclesiastical Council was low-key. I had known most of the folks on the committee for years. I was welcome to invite a few guests to be there with me as I answered the committee's questions. In one of my more savvy professional moves, I invited my grandma to come to the council. Grandma measures five feet tall on a humid day when her hair is frizzy, her face is wrinkled into a perpetual smile, and she greets everyone as if they are a long lost friend and says "Oh, bless your heart" a lot. I didn't know how the committee could really bring themselves to seriously grill me on any issues when there, sitting in a chair against the wall, was my grandma. I was right. They didn't challenge me on anything and my Ecclesiastical Council was an uneventful love fest.

However, Corey's experience wasn't such smooth sailing. Corey's Ecclesiastical Council was conducted by the Rhode Island Conference of the United Church of Christ. My experience of that conference was that the ministers serving churches there were exceptionally scholarly. Whenever I attended one of these Ecclesiastical Councils, I thanked my lucky stars that mine had occurred in my home conference in Ohio with Grandma busy blessing everyone's hearts. My clergy colleagues in Rhode Island were relentless, waiting to hear just the slightest hint of self-contradiction or hesitation on the part of the candidate for ministry before they pounced on the poor dolt like so many hyenas seizing upon the carcass of a recently deceased gazelle. And so, that's the kind of examination Corey faced as he stood before a sanctuary filled with clergy and laypeople.

The first few questions were typical—what do you believe about baptism, what theologian's writings have most impacted you, what's your theology of pastoral care. As Corey fielded the questions, I was thinking, "Hey, I could have answered those." But then, Carl Byer, Conference Minister of the Rhode Island Conference dropped the A-Bomb of Ecclesiastical Council questions—"Do you subscribe to the Theology of the Incarnation or an Adoptionist Theology?" Corey hesitated. I blanched. I'm cool with the incarnation, but what, pray tell, is an Adoptionist Theology? Carl went on and elaborated his question by quoting the verses Rick read for us this morning. "As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Corey must have read that chapter of his theology text book more thoroughly than did I because it didn't take him long to begin articulating a response to Carl's question. And as he talked, I began to comprehend just what an Adoptionist Theology is.

Adoptionist theology “refers to a Christological (meaning having to do with Christ) debate arguing whether Christ in human form was the divine Son of God by nature (as we celebrate in the Incarnation, God coming to us in the form of the baby Jesus) or by adoption.”¹ “According to this view, Jesus was basically a mortal man, albeit a very remarkable man in many respects, until the time when he was crucified unjustly by the Romans. At the moment of his death, he was adopted by God as his son, and the Messiah of Israel.”² It is an unfamiliar understanding of Jesus’ identity, made more complicated by the variety of interpretations of when Jesus became the Christ, at what point God adopted Jesus to be the Christ, the messiah. In historical writings from Medieval Spain, the priests at theological conventions surmised that Jesus became the Christ at the time of his resurrection. In Mark’s gospel it happens when Jesus goes “down in the river to pray.” When Jesus is baptized, God chooses him, ripping open the skies to reach down with a hand like a descending dove to shower him with the Spirit saying, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Indeed, Adoptionist Theology is not a school of thought with which we are well-acquainted. Even hard-working seminarians like I once was tend to stick with traditional stories of Christmas and the Incarnation. But what if we take the notion of Adoptionist Theology more seriously? I’m not suggesting we need to become adherents to Adoptionism, as it is called, but I do suggest that we take a moment to consider it and learn from it. Let’s reflect on what kind of an impact a doctrine from 4th century Spanish priests, brought to my attention at Corey’s Ecclesiastical Council, otherwise known as the Rhode Island Inquisition, and now brought to you, has on us as the people and friends of Suttons Bay Congregational Church.

To help us better understand how God is perceived in Adoptionist Theology, let’s look to real life examples of adoption. My brother Kevin and sister-in-law Jennifer are in the process of adopting a daughter from China. They have spent years learning about international adoption. Unlike his only sister who would choose a country from which to adopt based on hunches and instinct most likely making the decision in a matter of minutes, Kevin is very deliberate, as is Jennifer, and it was a lengthy process to decide where they would travel for an adoption. After the decision was made, they initiated the formal process set out for them by the adoption agency. This included home inspections, background checks, referrals, interviews, and reams of paperwork—not to mention the numerous fees that had to be paid along the way. Finally, they jumped through all the hoops and got all of the T’s crossed and I’s dotted and mailed their packet to the adoption agency. Weeks later they received confirmation that it had been accepted and was on its way to China.

At first they had been told it might take 8-9 months and that the baby would be around twelve months old when they went to get her. That was last winter. So, last summer Mom and I went downtown to the New Kids in Town clothing store and picked out darling little clothes for Olivia, that’s what they’re going to name her, to wear this winter. Best case scenario was that she’d be here to celebrate Christmas. But, later in the summer, they were told that it would be longer before they could travel to get her—maybe not until this spring. So, mom and I were back in the stores buying spring clothes for Olivia with high hopes that she’d join us for Easter. But now it’s looking like none of us will be meeting little Olivia until late this coming summer, nearly two years after they had initiated the formal adoption process. And yes, Mom and I have returned to New Kids in Town and Olivia will be sporting some fine late-summer fashions when she finally does arrive.

¹ Interactive Moments in Medieval Spain www.medspains.standord.edu/demo/thmese/adotionism

² Franzmaan, Majella. *Jesus in the Nag Hammadi Writing*, Edinburgh: T & T Clar, 1996, p. 293

Kevin and Jennifer's long, drawn out story filled with expectations, hopes, set-backs, and sacrifice can lend us great insight into Adoptionist Theology. Think about it—if two human beings are working this hard to make a home for one little girl, think how hard God is working to make a home for each one of us.

To know the anxiety, fear, and finally joy of the adoptive parent is to begin to glimpse the soul of God—our heavenly parent who so desperately yearns for us to come home. An adoptive mother, Bryn Kreidel, wrote the following prayer before receiving her baby.

Then I remember that you [God] wait and wonder . . . Longing for your adopted children to be in your arms . . . Gazing into your eyes, hearing your love songs . . . Suddenly, I know how you feel, God . . . That constriction of the heart that causes pain to the depths of the soul. And I know that my pain is more godly than anything in my life has ever been. For once, my heart is like your heart. And this holy pain leads me to my knees . . . To thank you for the wait . . . And to pray for all the babies that need to come home . . . Yours and mine.

Adoptionist Theology leaves room for Homecoming. It does not take for granted any kind of a reality that children will already be at home. It encompasses the very real pain of barrenness and grief. It recognizes the miracle that one can be a parent not only by virtue of conception, but also by virtue of adoption. It reminds us that when we cannot provide for ourselves, God can and does provide with the wonderful gifts, sometimes even with the gift of a child. And really, it is a reminder that all life is a gift from God and when we receive that gift and recognize God as parent, we are, in a sense, being adopted and welcomed home into God's open arms.

This has ramifications for our life together as a church family. As God's adopted children—each and every one of us—we are also brothers and sisters in Christ. The spiritual bonds of the family of God are no less real than the genetic bond I have with Kevin. There aren't any biological children in the family of God—we're all adoptees, but loved no less than if God's own self had birthed us all.

Though I was mortified by the question at the time, thank God Carl Byer asked Corey about this Adoptionist Theology. For surely there is a rich understanding of God inherent in it. We need not choose between Adoptionism or Incarnation, it is a false choice. God is big enough for both as witnessed to us in the Biblical account and articulated to us by Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, associate professor at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. She writes, "In the nativity scene, the adoptive father Joseph and the biological mother Mary represent all humankind. God is at work as creator and as adopting parent. And, of course, God is the child, who will later be abandoned on the cross. The emotions and experiences of birth mother, adoptive parent, and child are all embraced by God."

Adoptionist Theology teaches us that there is room for us all in the family of God. It teaches us, that in God's eyes, we are all beloved children. It teaches us that, although precious and sacred, a biological nuclear family is not the end all be all. It teaches us that, though we may have once been, we are strangers no more and the world is full of our brothers and sisters in Christ. It teaches us that we're home now; God has sought us out and brought us to God's own self so that we might reside in the house of God for all eternity. Thanks be to God for adopting us and making us God's very own.