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Sermon given at St. Andrew's Church, Kent, on the Feast of the Baptism of Our
Lord

January 12, 2020

In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

On Wednesday, as I sat down to work on this sermon, I was having trouble getting started, so I did what any sensible person caught in such a bind would do: I decided to look at Twitter just to see what was happening out there in the world. Anyone prone to digital procrastination would tell you this will never work, but I am happy to say that, at least in this one instance, they would be wrong. There we were in one of the greatest international crises since I don't know when, the highest of tensions between Iran and the United States. Yes, President Trump had signaled he would use sanctions instead of weapons to retaliate against Iran for its missile attacks on our bases, but who knew what would really happen. Even so, trending as the number one hot topic on Twitter—surpassing Donald Trump, surpassing the Iranians, surpassing the hashtag topic of World War III—was the news that Prince Harry of the United Kingdom and his wife Meghan would be stepping away from their responsibilities as part of the royal family, an announcement that later acquired the nickname of Megxit.

I do not know if there is anyone here this morning who considers the inner workings of the royal family to be more important than the threat of nuclear apocalypse. I have to say I was perplexed by this obsession at that moment. I have never particularly been a watcher of the royal family, but, based on any number of *People Magazines* perused while waiting for an appointment at the barbershop or the dentist, I'm guessing many Americans, despite the events of 1776, feel a certain affinity for the royals. All of this got me to thinking about them—especially their role in British life, and particularly the line of succession (since Harry seemed to be removing himself from this line)—so I wasted a little more time with online research and discovered an interesting fact: When Queen Elizabeth passes (something which no one longs for, not even the most indifferent of royal watchers such as I), her son Charles immediately—at that very moment—becomes the king. His siblings that day are expected to kiss his ring as a sign of their consent to this. When the coronation service takes place in Westminster Abbey up to a year later, the Archbishop of Canterbury proclaims him and crowns him to be something that indeed he already is: the King of England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Thus, the coronation in a formal way initiates him into a role of service to his nation that was his destiny from before his birth.

Quite remarkably, all of this helped me understand this morning's Gospel a little better. There is Jesus as the River Jordan. John the Baptist, recognizing

Jesus' unique calling or holiness, hesitates to baptize him, but Jesus insists, saying this act is "proper ... in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Like John the Baptist, we too—we who have been steeped in the notion that the most important function of baptism is to wash away our sins—something that Peter references in this morning's reading from Acts—we might find it strange that Jesus, the sinless Son of God, insists on being baptized. The reason for this, however becomes clear immediately afterwards, as Jesus comes up out of the water, when he sees the spirit of God descending upon him like a dove, and God proclaims from heaven, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." Much like the Archbishop of Canterbury at a coronation, God is proclaiming, with joy, something that the scriptures have *already* told us to be true, even before Jesus's birth—that this is His Beloved Son, and, having been baptized, Jesus is now ready to begin his life of service—not just to a nation like a worldly king, but indeed to the whole world. He is now ready to embrace that vision of God's Servant, the Messiah, that we heard in this morning's reading from the Prophet Isaiah: "I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

Let us hear again the words God spoke at the Baptism of our Lord: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We need to keep in mind that these words at baptism are not limited to our Lord Jesus Christ. In that baptism, God proclaimed Jesus’ identity, his true identity, as his Beloved Son, and in **our** baptism, in our sacrament that re-enacts the rite which Jesus insisted upon receiving from John the Baptist, **Jesus'** identity becomes **ours**. Thus, it’s important—very important—to remember that God in our baptisms said and continues to say these words to us as well: “This is my Son, this is my Daughter, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Now, in no way do I want to deny the other more traditional understanding of baptism as something that washes away our sins, but, in adopting us through Christ into his family, God proclaims something that, like Charles as future King of England, was, in a way, our destiny before we were born. We are God’s beloved children. We are part of His royal priesthood. We are blessed and lifted up in baptism. And like Jesus, we now are invited to embrace his work as God’s servant, to be “a covenant to the people” and “a light to the nations.”

And it is so important that from time to time we are reminded of this. We get bogged down in the affairs of the world and the minutiae of our everyday lives. We become filled with regret—for things we’ve done to others, for things we’ve done to ourselves. We are tired—tired of carrying on with all of the burdens and

responsibilities given to us, and maybe we even become a little cranky and impatient. After all, am I wrong in thinking that each of us has come here this morning with something on our mind, something that is worrying that us, something that is bearing down on us? Life too often becomes like pushing a wheelbarrow filled with heavy stones, and we're so focused on the stones and *not* tipping over our wheelbarrows that we forget who we are—God's beloved children, his holy and beloved sons and daughters, lifted up before and by God in baptism.

I began this today by talking about royalty, so I think it's only fair for me to end it by going to the other end of the spectrum and talking about pigs. Specifically, I'd like to read a poem by Galway Kinnell, an American poet, called "St. Francis and the Sow". It's a poem that says something similar:

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch

it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as Saint Francis
put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow
began remembering all down her thick length,
from the earthen snout all the way
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine
down through the great broken heart
to the sheer blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and blowing beneath
them:
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

Indeed, sometimes it **is** necessary to reteach a thing—even us—its loveliness, “to
put a hand on its brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch it is lovely.”

Today is an invitation for us to remember—despite all of our failings and all of the
slop of our everyday lives that sometimes makes us feel like that sow—that in
God’s eyes, we are lovely and we are loved—that God has put his hand on us and
blessed us and said, “You are My beloved son. You are My beloved daughter.”

And in consequence, here today we are invited to His royal banquet, the Sacrament
of His Holy Communion, and we are recharged to do His holy work of loving

others in this hurting world, of being beacons of His grace. In all that you do today and always, keep that in mind. So sit up straight. Smile a little more. Rejoice a little more. Love a little more. Be strong. Speak in prayer a little more to your Heavenly Father. Carry on in doing what is right and good a little longer—because you are God’s beloved son. You are God’s beloved daughter. And we are His beloved family. Amen.