

**1 Epiphany – Year B – January 11, 2009**  
**Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11**  
**Susan E. Wilmot**

How many of us remember the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*? At a time when the space age was in full throttle, this movie was a huge hit and a groundbreaking look at the fascinating possibility of life beyond the confines of earth. Throughout the movie, all kinds of people begin to compulsively draw or sculpt the physical location where they would encounter this new life form. Art imitates life, and I'd like to propose that in its own way, this movie reflects the continuing struggles and questions of this and every age in the history of humanity. One is the search for God, in what Eucharistic Prayer C calls, "the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home." Another aspect is much more personal. It is the question of "who am I?"

As in all new relationships, for just over six months now, you and I have been getting to know one another. Beyond the obvious, like the fact that I talk with an English accent and am a woman, there are more subtle things. For instance, I have shared some of my own story and experiences, the who and what of events that have led me to this point in my life. Equally, I have been blessed to get to know many of you as you have shared with me a part of who you are, and what is going on in your life. As we discover in today's Gospel reading what binds you and me goes much deeper than our common humanity, or the fact that we gather together regularly as servants of this community. You and I might answer the question of "who are you?" in many different ways. For instance, some of us would respond in terms of how we are known to the world by our names or our relationships, like wife, husband, parent, sister or brother. Some people would answer by defining themselves through work or education, like engineer, nurse, teacher, doctor, administrator, or librarian. Or even as a function of our life and ministry in this place, like ministry team leader, vestryperson, acolyte, reader, or chalice bearer. Some might put the response in religious terms like Christian, Episcopalian, or Lutheran. There is no right or wrong answer here – we all have multiple roles and identities in life because we are a part of a complex web of relationships. So in whatever way we choose to answer, it will almost certainly represent only a fraction of our fullness in the world. Yet, our primary response at this time in each of our lives, is undoubtedly setting the stage for our motivation, actions, and being in the world today.

In our Advent Bible study on the first two chapters of the Gospel of Luke, we had quite a discussion on the question of when did Jesus know that He was the Son of God. Was it from an early age? Perhaps it was a growing knowledge as Mary told Him about the circumstances of His birth, and some of why they had moved around so much when Jesus was a child. Was it when He was twelve years old and was found by Mary and Joseph teaching in the Temple at Jerusalem? Or was it when He comes to John the Baptist at the river Jordan and experiences the events of His Baptism? Wrestle with it! For me, this is why the Scripture is so exciting. It is God's constant invitation to draw, to sculpt, to hear the Creator's harmonies resonating throughout the universe, to play out the possibilities in my encounter and your encounter with God in Word and Sacrament, in relationships, and in community. The Gospel always challenges us to participate in the life of God.

Time has elapsed before Mark begins to write, but no time is wasted in this concise and very precise account of the beginning of John's ministry and Jesus' ministry. The narrator's voice immediately tells us how many people from the Judean countryside are responding to John's participation in God's continuous creative activity. As the forerunner of Jesus, John is re-shaping lives, and preparing each of us for our own baptism. There is no identity crisis for John. The narrator tells us through John's proclamations that he knows exactly who he is and why he is doing what he's doing. John baptizes with water, but "the one more powerful" than he will baptize with the Holy

Spirit. John's ministry is the prelude to the main event, and he will never claim or desire more than that. Jesus comes to John to participate in the life of God by affirming John's baptism of repentance. For Mark, there is also another reason why we find Jesus wading into the river Jordan and being baptized. In at least one sense in the broader scheme of God's work in reconciling the world to Himself, the reason that Jesus is baptized is the same reason that you and I are also baptized.

Three things happen as Jesus emerges dripping and gasping from the water. The heavens are rent asunder; the Holy Spirit descends on Him like a dove; and He hears the voice of God saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." This is the beginning of the Sacrament of Christian baptism. As the opening of the heavens tells us, we know that this is God's work, God's decisive act in breaking in to the lives of everyone who is baptized. In the Gospel of Mark, the tearing of the heavens at Jesus' baptism is mirrored at the crucifixion by the tearing of the Temple curtain. God is here. God is loose in the world. God dwells among us, not just in some place built by human hands. In the waters of baptism, each baptismal candidate symbolically dies with Christ. That is, we die to self; we die to our old life of sin, and then rise from the waters to new life in Christ. Water is the outward and visible sign of our cleansing and our forgiveness for sins. The inward and spiritual sign of our new identity is the gift of the Holy Spirit that descends on each of the newest members of Christ's Body. Jesus was named at His baptism. Named by God as God's Beloved Son. At our baptism, we are named, marked and sealed as Christ's own forever. Claimed by God as a son or daughter. In a 2003 article from *Christian Century*, UCC pastor Jack Good makes two important observations. "Baptism ... sets each of us apart as a particular kind of person --- one owned by God." Baptism also means that we are "called to live out the meaning of this remarkable reality. The unbaptized also belong to God, but ... have had no ... opportunity to celebrate ... that fact; thus they are apt to feel no motivation to act on its implications."

After our own encounter with God in baptism, we can never remain the same. This act of God's love and grace dares us to embrace a new identity, a new life, a new reality as a son of God or as a daughter of God. And so at its absolute core, the question of who we are, is answered. Just as it is for Jesus, our new name opens up the heavens to us. There is no limit to how much we can participate in the life of God in our earthly journey and in the life to come. The possibilities as co-creators with God are endless; our baptism seals this incredible relationship to our gracious God. How we respond individually, and as a community of faith is up to us. John has a vital role in the public ministry of preparing his people for Jesus. Jesus, as God incarnate, has a unique role in the history of salvation. You and I also have unique and vital parts to play in making a difference according to God's purposes for our lives now and for eternity. Once again, as we celebrate the feast of the Baptism of our Lord, we remember that baptism is only the beginning. It is the beginning of a lifetime of meeting God in the places, the faces, and all the circumstances of your life and mine.

As we prepare for our annual meeting next Sunday, I invite you to think about who you are as God's son or daughter, and who we are as this community of faith, members of Christ's Body in this place at this time. How do your identity and our identity shape our presence in this community and the world, in the way that it contours the ministries of John, Jesus, and all believers? John Stendahl once wrote, "To be at a beginning is to find that we are not prisoners of the past.... We need not be bound [by anything]...." Staying close to God in prayer and worship, in love and service to our Lord and one another will help us to discern the future. Happy New Year!

Amen.