

Little Transfigurations
Last Sunday after the Epiphany—Year A
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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The Baptism of Adam Boyd

Sometimes, religious symbols are a little over the top. Today's Gospel has a mountain, the voice of God, dazzling white clothes, a face that shines like the sun, and a visit from both Moses and Elijah. Talk about an overproduced, Oscar-baity scene. We get it. Jesus is a big deal. But where is the subtlety? Where are the understated and tasteful religious symbols? The whole story is a little obvious.

I'm mostly joking, but I do notice that the author of today's Gospel story was really laying on the images thick. It's as if the author wanted there to be absolutely no mistaking the fact that today is a pivotal moment in the ministry of Jesus. This is the moment when the disciples get a glimpse behind the veil—when they get to see some evidence that Jesus is not just a rabbi with some good ideas but is Divine, is the Son of God.

This past Sunday, the confirmation students learned about baptism. We took a tour of the font, we smelled the oil, we learned about the promises the parents will make to raise the child in the love of God. And we learned about the responsibilities of the godparents and the entire parish to help in the project of raising a child in the Christian faith.

The confirmation students learned that baptism is a deep and complicated symbol. It can be understood many different ways: as an initiation, a dying of the old and birth of the new, a ritual bath, a recalling of the waters present at the creation of the world. We also learned that baptism is one of the few things that all Christians everywhere in every time have shared. We learned that it uses humble elements so that everyone may participate. And we learned that it can take place in the most gilded font in the most exquisite cathedral or it can take place in a puddle in a field.

As the confirmation class talked through the rite of baptism, it occurred to me that we're being pretty obvious about the symbols. We are not being subtle. We have fire and water and oil. We have special prayers and special white clothes. We even say an incantation of sorts that hasn't changed by one word in at least two thousand years: I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Where is our understated and tasteful religion?

I suppose some things are just too important to do with any kind of subtlety. God's love is far too lavish for us to recognize it with anything less than our most beautiful expressions. There is nothing at all subtle about welcoming Adam into the family of Christ.

As with all sacraments, we ritualize things that are already true. It's not that God needs the water and fire and oil to love Adam. God has loved Adam since before Adam was a twinkle in his

parents' eyes. We need the water and fire and oil to remind US that God is good. And that God is love. And that God cares for us all.

As I told the confirmation kids during the lesson; we use these lavish symbols because it's so hard to put into words Divine love. That kind of faithful and Godly presence defies words, and so the church tries to get at truth in another way—in a highly stylized way.

We are Christians—or put another way, we are little Christs. So, I suppose you might say that Adam is about to have a little Transfiguration. We are going to see behind the veil to see the true nature of this little baby—a nature that is enlivened by God, loved by God and totally infused with the grace of God. Adam will, in his way, shine just as brightly as Jesus shone up on the mountain with Peter James and John.

The rest of you have two parts to play this morning. The first is this: you will promise to help Adam's parents raise him into the full stature of Christ. The second is trickier: to remember that you too were baptized. You too were welcomed into the family of God. You too were transfigured on top of a mountain with Jesus. You too were lavished with water and fire and oil to remind you of the love of God for you. Welcome to the family of Christ, Adam. Welcome to the family of Christ, people of St. Mark's. Amen.