Beatified Goats

February 2nd, 2020

4th Sunday after Epiphany

Once upon a time, a fox wandered in the dark and fell into a well. Not long after, a thirsty goat came by. When he saw the fox down in the well, he asked if the water was any good. “It is the best water I have ever had!” the fox exclaimed. “Come on down and have some!” The goat happily jumped into the well and started to drink. When he had quenched his thirst, he looked around and upward, and realized that he was trapped. “What shall we do?” the goat lamented. The fox thought for a moment and said, “I know. Here’s what we can do. Stretch as high as you can with your forelegs, and I will climb up your back and leap out. Then I can go get some help for you.” It was the only thing the goat could do, and so he stood as tall as he could, stretching his forelegs up the wall of the well, allowing the fox to walk up his back and escape. The fox began to walk away. The goat called out loudly for help and reminded him of his promise, but all we are going to get out of this ancient fable is that we are supposed to distrust everybody and every situation and look before you leap or else all is lost and mere despair. The goat is left to lament his fate. And though this story seems to be about goats and foxes, it is really about human beings, for all of us have found ourselves in the bottom of a well, in the darkness, trapped and despondent. And Christ came into our lives to bring us redemption from this predicament, to bring us hope.

Today we will be baptizing a good sister of ours. The lectionary, in a very timely manner, asks us to remember the beatitudes, the opening sentences of the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:1-12). The beatitudes paint a portrait of the One we follow when we are baptized and put our faith in Jesus; they also paint a landscape of what our journey will look like when we follow Jesus. They are the essence of the divine life itself, the life given to us and lived in the Holy Spirit. Though otherworldly in nature, these statements are also worldly in a practical sense that we seldom recognize. After all, what is the plight of those who are perfectly content? Those who are arrogant? Those who never think long enough about anything to mourn? Those who are unmerciful? Those who have no appetite for righteousness? Those with hearts full of darkness and impurity? Those who are bellicose? Those who never seem to draw any criticism whatsoever for doing the right thing? Those who are never persecuted for the Name of Christ? What is that life like? All of us know what that life is like even if we do not admit it out loud. It is a miserable life. It is life at the bottom of the well, lamenting like the poor goat trapped by the fox. All the contentment, praise, pride, force, cunning, lack of mercy and notoriety will not hide the inner abyss of being lost—cut off from what really matters in life and cut off from God. Some years ago, I saw short film. Many of you have probably seen it before, but it would not hurt to be reminded. The short film depicted the fate of a man who had fallen into a deep well, like our goat. There was no way to climb out, and all he could do was stare up at the circle of sky above him. Now and then, people would walk by and give him advice. One told him to pray a certain way; another told him to meditate. Some spoke of the whole thing as an illusion. One by one they came to give advice, and one by one they departed. And then one day, a rugged fellow leaned over the well and called down to the man asking if he wanted to get out. The man cried out that indeed, he wanted to. Suddenly, a rope flew down from above. And then a shadow appeared, using the rope to climb down into the well. The rugged fellow took hold of the man who had been trapped, carried him on his back, and climbed back out of the well. When they got out of the well, the rugged fellow disappeared, but the freed man saw what had secured the rope that had been used to bring him to safety—and it was a cross!

That is who Christ is—he came into the well to help us out of it. Everything that Christ is and everything that Christ teaches is what lifts us out of the well, what turns the lament of the goat into surprise, jubilation, and joyful praise. When we walk in the beatitudes, we are free of the well. When we neglect the beatitudes, we live as though we were still at the bottom, mired in the mud, hungry, cold, exhausted and without hope. Our lives are not meant to be that way, and Christ comes to lift us up from that predicament. Baptism is like that rope—it ties us to Christ and to the cross. This is why Paul writes to the Romans: “Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). When Jesus taught Nicodemus about baptism (John 3), he talked about a whole new life, of being born of water and Spirit, and he quickly linked it to his own lifting up on the cross that would bring healing, just as the bronze serpent healed the children of Israel in the desert, when they were visited by fiery asps. Jesus cures us in every way. There are numerous images of baptism in the New Testament. Some are direct symbols, some are a bit more indirect, but they always tell us something about what Jesus is enabling or empowering in our lives through the grace of God. Apparently, the St. Antonios Antiochian Orthodox Church in Halifax, Nova Scotia recently had new icons painted around their baptismal font. One shows the baptism of St. Christina. I am very familiar with St. Christina, but not the one in their painting. There were also paintings of Biblical scenes, naturally—the crossing of the Red Sea, the baptism of Jesus, Christ walking on the water, the Samaritan woman at the well. And above all these, on the ceiling, the beautiful, white wings of a dove to show the abiding of the Holy Spirit. When we are poor in spirit, when we are meek, when we hunger for righteousness, when we mourn, when we are pure, when we make peace, when we suffer for what is right and for the Name of Christ—then we are not only walking with Christ, we are soaring on the wings of a dove, on the very wings of the Holy Spirit, abiding in Him as He abides in us (John 14-15)! Consider, first, the icon of the Red Sea. Paul links the crossing of the Red Sea to baptism (1 Corinthians 10:1-13). Paul draws our attention to the relationship between our life in Christ and the freedom it gives. It is real liberation. Consider, for a moment, the icon showing Christ walking on the water. In the ancient Near East, the sea was associated with the realm of the dead and with utmost despair. In walking on water, Christ demonstrated His victory over our fears of death and darkness, but also His victory over death and darkness themselves. When we live the beatitudes, we walk across the abyss with Christ, safe from sinking. That which is dark weights us, drags us down; that which is light gives us buoyancy; it lifts us up. And Christ was lifted up that we might be lifted up, that we might know the freedom of the blue sky and the open air outside the dark well.

The lesson of the goat should not be *look before you leap.* You did not look before you leapt into existence—there’s a conundrum for you. Nobody has perfect foresight, and nobody can avoid every single pitfall in life—certainly not the pitfalls of sin, death, and sadness. The lesson of the goat is this—that you need Christ, now and forevermore. It is easy to walk by the well and say great things—much harder to get down into it and help. Christ says wonderful things, but He also comes down into the well to lift us up to eternal life in Him. What greater epiphany have we need of than this? Blessed are the goats, whom Christ the Shepherd makes his sheep.