

SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

“NOT GOD...BUT GOD’S BELOVED”

*Preached by the Reverend Canon Dr. Charles Robertson,
Canon to the Presiding Bishop and Primate of the Episcopal Church
January 10, 2010 First Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22*

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”

It feels very good to be with you here in New Canaan...and to see your rector once more. A dear friend from my days as Canon to the Ordinary of Arizona, I can truly say that I believe you are blessed to have Peter Walsh here with you. I also know from our conversations that Peter realizes how blessed he is to be here at St. Mark’s.

I am not a “cradle Episcopalian,” but rather grew up with a Roman Catholic dad and a Southern Baptist mom. We went to Mass and to parochial school, for the sake of unity, my mother said. Of course, she also said, “Don’t you believe everything the Pope tells you.” I nodded dutifully at the admonition, though I confess that I did not expect to hear the Pontiff’s voice myself.

I do remember, however, the first time I heard the voice of God...well, almost. I was a young acolyte serving at the 6:45 a.m. daily Eucharist, a service that only the most disciplined and devout would attend regularly...meaning that it usually

had six to eight folks, all seated in various spots throughout the two-hundred-and-fifty seat sanctuary. Normally, they would hear the pastor, Fr. Lou, offer a few words of encouragement before going into the Communion, but on this one particular day, Fr. Lou had invited a visiting theologian to preach. And he preached, and preached, and preached, and preached. About thirty-five minutes into his five point sermon on sin and repentance, I suddenly heard it. Coming from above. The voice of God. And it was...snoring. Yes, I heard a voice from the heavens, snoring, and I was astonished. I looked around at the tiny congregation and saw them looking up—the miracle was not for me alone! Then, suddenly it dawned on me. Perhaps this was not as miraculous as I thought. For earlier that week, the church’s new remote microphones had finally arrived, and Fr. Lou was wearing one, and sure enough, he had not turned it off. He was...deep in meditation. Okay, he was snoring. Loud. In fact, he

was beginning to snore and snort, and his body was starting to lean to the left, like a human Tower of Pisa. It was becoming embarrassing. Everyone was noticing now, at least almost everyone. Our scholarly preacher was just wrapping up point three of his exposition and ready to move on to point four. Finally, knowing what I had to do, I mustered all the courage my youthful body had, asked the Lord's forgiveness, and jabbed Fr. Lou in the ribs, abruptly waking him. Startled, he stood and boldly proclaimed, "We believe in one God!" Never have I witnessed a more exuberant recital of the Creed than by those faithful few.

Whether he knew it or not, it was Fr. Lou, and not the learned theologian, who gave the sermon that has stayed with me. For when he was not even fully alert, the words he said were the words he remembered, the words that had become a part of him: We believe in one God.

What will you remember? Traveling with the Presiding Bishop, I often hear her begin a conversation with diocesan clergy by calling them all to remember the Gospel account that we heard today of the baptism of Jesus. She invites them to take note of the heavenly words to Jesus: "You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased." In our own baptism in Christ, these words are for us as well: "You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased." Not a bad thing to remember. Think, too, of those words from the Prayer Book that we will hear a few minutes from now: "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever." Again, not a bad thing to remember. Isaiah was

right: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."

You and I don't have to live our lives in worry and anxiety as if everything ultimately depends on us. As I fly to all parts of the Church and world, I often see people try to cram an obviously overstuffed piece of luggage into the plane's overhead bins. I recall one passenger in particular who refused to admit that he had too much in the bag, too much baggage. He struggled and panted and cursed. Finally, the flight attendant came over and gently coaxed him to let go, "It's too much, let me take it for you." I understood. Years earlier, during my first pastoral call, I walked into the parish office looking particularly weary, as if the weight of the world was on my shoulders. My assistant, who was not above a touch of sarcasm, took one look at me and said, "I hadn't heard the news." "What news?" was my irritable response. "The news that God resigned and you've been named the replacement." The good news is that God has not resigned. As Fr. Lou unintentionally proclaimed during that early morning service years ago, "We believe in one God"...and it is not us. You are not God. What you are is beloved.

As we begin to take this in, really take it in, we can dare to take our ministry, our responsibilities seriously, while refusing to fall into the trap of taking ourselves too seriously. When we are able to put into perspective that God is God and we are not, then, as Henri Nouwen puts it, "somehow our successes and failures slowly lose their power over us." More

than this, we can also go further and recognize that this God in whom we believe is God “of all that is, seen and unseen.” God who creates possibilities where previously we could not see any. God who redeems seemingly irredeemable situations. God who is the giver of life, abundant life.

God wants us to be “spiritual detectives,” looking for God’s footsteps, God’s fingerprints, clues of God’s presence in all that is around us. In the “canon” of Sherlock Holmes stories, the great detective was asked by Dr. Watson why it was that both of them saw the very same thing, and yet only Holmes was able to deduce fantastic things as a result. The detective’s answer was brief and to the point: “You see, but you do not observe...and that makes all the difference.” Our challenge, our gift, is to observe keenly evidence of God at work all around us, in places where we do not necessarily expect to find such evidence, in people who have long since forgotten that they are beloved by God. Archbishop Tait, convener of the second Lambeth Conference, in 1875, rejected the need to seek complete uniformity of thought and instead said, “I think it would be a work of love in which we should be engaged—the extension of Christ’s Kingdom—and that we may be able by friendly intercourse to strengthen each other’s hands.”

And what does this look like? Years ago, I was walking through the grounds of Emory University in Atlanta when from a distance I saw Bishop Desmond Tutu. He was guest-teaching there at the time. Looking frail from health struggles of that time, the bishop was accompanied

by a “handler” who looked like he could take on the entire New England Patriots defensive line. Eager to meet this legendary figure, I ran up, only to be immediately put off by the blocker. “The bishop is busy,” he growled. Turning away and feeling like little more than chopped liver, I suddenly heard a tiny but powerful voice: “Come, come.” As I approached him, Bishop Tutu said, “Tell me your name.” I did, and he responded, “and tell me about yourself.” For the next ten to fifteen minutes, I could not have received more attention from this important figure than if I had been the President of the United States or the Archbishop of Canterbury. For that time, I was someone of infinite value. Finally, noting the handler’s glances at his watch, I turned to leave, but not before Bishop Tutu grasped my shoulder, looked me in the eye, and quietly said, “I will remember you, Chuck Robertson.” Not chopped liver. Beloved. God’s Beloved.

This is our priceless gift to all those around us, to those whose baggage has become so full, so heavy, that they have forgotten who they are and whose they are. We can help, we can be ambassadors and bridge-builders. We can proclaim good news, and do so, as the Prayer book says, “not only with our lips but in our lives.” When we remember that we are not God, but God’s beloved, then we can let go of our need to control...and in doing so, help others to let go as well.

So, “do not fear,” take a deep breath, relax. You are not God, you are God’s beloved. Amen.

