
Grafted In

A Homily for Baptism

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My family tells me that the three most important words in real estate are *location, location, location*.

I think the three most important words in faith are not so different — except that the location is not place, but story.

What we are doing today is locating these children.

Two children. Two families. One historic chapel, in which families very much like yours have been baptizing their children for more than three hundred years.

The continuity is not accidental. It is the point.

What we are doing today is older than this sacred structure. It is older than the headstones in the graveyard outside, bearing the names of those who preceded us here. We are doing what the church has done since the first disciples understood what Jesus was asking of them: we are placing these children into a story.

A story we have learned to live into, and out of.

That story begins — and this matters — not with what these children will do, or become, or believe, or achieve. It begins with what God has always already been doing. Long before either of them drew their first breath. Long before their parents met. Long before the town of Childsburry was settled or the original wooden chapel was built on this site.

The story begins in the heart of God — in what Samuel Wells, the vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London, describes as the effervescent abundance of the Trinity: three persons so completely absorbed in mutual and utter joy that there is no lack, no need, no deficit of any kind. And yet, out of that very abundance, God chooses to be *with* us. Not because anything is missing, but because abundance overflows.

Creation is the overflow of that joy. And the whole story — from the first morning of existence to the final destiny of all things — is the story of that abundance pressing toward us, with us, for us, refusing to be separated from us.

Into that story, these two children are being grafted today.

Wells writes that baptism is "the public recognition of the renunciation of a story of alienation and the declaration of having been grafted into a story of being with God."

This description has two movements.

The first is renunciation.

Baptism says *no* to a particular kind of story — the story that tells these children they are alone, that their worth must be earned, that the universe is indifferent to them, that what they have done wrong defines who they are. This is an old story, and it has been told for a long time. Baptism, from its very first moment, says: that story is false. We renounce it. We will not let it have the first word over these children's lives.

The second movement is grafting in.

Not just a rejection of the false, but an incorporation into the true. These children are being placed into the story of a God who has never stopped pressing toward us — the God who, when Jesus came up from the Jordan, spoke before any achievement, before any proof of worthiness, before anything at all:

You are my beloved. In you I am well pleased.

Identity before performance. Belovedness before usefulness.

This same vision animates the work of William Porcher DuBose, an Anglican theologian who spent his career at Sewanee arguing that the Christian life begins not with human effort but with divine initiative — that we are taken up into Christ before we do anything to deserve it.

You can see it, too, in what Jesus tells his disciples on the night before his death. He promises to send the Spirit — the Comforter — who will take what is his and make it present to us. That Spirit descended at the Jordan. That same Spirit moves over this water today. The grafting holds. The voice doesn't fade with distance or time or wilderness.

That voice will speak over these children today. And here is what I want their parents, their godparents, and all of you to know: it will not change.

Whatever wilderness comes — and something will come, for all of us — the voice spoken at this font is the truest thing that will ever be said about them.

Beloved. Mine.

Notice that in the Gospel, the voice at the Jordan is followed immediately by the wilderness. The Spirit drives Jesus into the desert, where the tempter comes. And what does the tempter say?

If you are the Son of God — prove it.

Turn stones to bread. Throw yourself from the temple. The temptation is not to do something dramatic and terrible. It is simply to doubt the voice. To believe that the declaration at the Jordan was not enough. That belovedness must be earned.

Jesus refuses. And the pattern of that refusal — trusting the voice before the wilderness, not after — is what we are asking these families to pass on. Not certainty about every doctrine. Not immunity from doubt or difficulty. Just this: when the wilderness comes, remember the voice. Remember the water. Remember that you were named beloved before you did anything to deserve it, and that name does not expire.

So what are we saying to these children today?

Welcome to the story of God and his people. This is a story about God's abundance, not your scarcity. You are grafted in. You are beloved. And nothing will ever write you out of it.

Our task, from this day forward, is to keep telling them so — in every way and every day.

Amen.