

First Sunday after Epiphany  
Year C  
January 10, 2010  
Good Shepherd, Berkeley

Is. 43:1-7  
Psalm 29  
Acts 8:14-17  
Lk 3:15-16,21-22

I want to talk to you today about playing dress-up, about imitation, about modeling. And I want to talk to you today about these things as metaphors for baptism, because our celebration of the feast of Jesus' baptism calls us to reflect upon our own.

On Christmas Eve some of you may have met my middle child, Elizabeth. One day, more years ago than I care to tally, when Elizabeth was about four years old, I was in one of my typical frenzied flurries of housecleaning. We were at the picking-up-the-first-layer-of-junk phase and I called the children to come and remove their toys, crayons, dolls, books, jars of bugs and other paraphernalia from the dining room table. As usual, we were on the third summons and my voice was rising in both volume and pitch when Elizabeth's response came floating from her bedroom. With the proper testiness that only a four year old can muster she said "***Please, do not bother me right now, I'm writing a sermon!***" That was too good to pass up. I went into her room and she was sitting at her little table, which was about 24 inches high. She had folded a piece of white paper and wrapped it around her neck like a clerical collar, taped it in the back, and was scribbling away on a lined legal pad. My briefcase, which had disappeared earlier, had its contents spread out all over the floor.

We all know that the most powerful teaching tool we have with our children is modeling. What we **do** speaks volumes more than what we say. I was a bit chagrined to hear the testy echo of my own inflections in my child's voice. But children do learn best by imitation. How many times, in those early years, did I hear: "Katie be the mommy and Elizabeth be the daddy and Daniel be the little sister"? Then off they would go to the dress-up cupboard. There's something

to be said for this childlike imitation and it's the reason children's games are so important. They're always trying on grownup roles - mom, dad, teacher, doctor, priest, astronaut (had I only known...). C.S. Lewis says that "the pretence of being a grown up helps them to grow up in earnest."

Well, this imitation and playing at dress-up is a little bit of what we're about when we baptize people – big and little people – into the Christian community; or when we renew our own baptismal vows as we will do following the sermon. In baptism and its renewal we are putting ourselves in the place of being children of God. We are dressing up as Christ. Because of the model we find in this morning's Gospel, the model of Jesus' own baptism by John and the confirmation of his sonship from the Father, we too, baptize new members in the Church and recognize that we are all children of the God through our dressing up as Christ.

What is the good of this dressing-up as Christ, particularly when 99% of the time we fail so miserably at carrying off the pretence? One very good reason that I can think of is that sometimes pretending something is real, actually leads to the thing itself. Again I quote from C.S. Lewis who says that "very often the only way to get a quality in reality is to start behaving as if you had it already." So it is with Christianity. I would suggest that it is our baptism that puts us on the road of a pretence that, by God's grace, will one day turn into a reality, namely that the Christ we put on in Baptism will become one with our own self.

In 1897 the English essayist, Max Beerbohm, wrote a story called "The Happy Hypocrite" that exemplifies this transformation. (Plot summary edited down from Wikipedia.) The protagonist is named Lord George Hell. He's very worldly, quite a dandy. (Those late Victorians were not very subtle, were they?) One day he is enjoying lavish outdoor entertainment in London with his lover, La Gambogi, when a young and innocent dancer named Jenny Mere

performs on the stage. A dwarf sitting with Lord George, revealed to be Cupid, fires his arrow into Lord George's breast.

Lord George boldly proposes marriage to Jenny, but she says that she will only marry a man with the face of a saint. Confused, Lord George spends the night wandering the streets, heartbroken. In the morning, he stumbles upon a mask maker's shop of a man named Mr. Aeneas. (There's that Victorian subtlety again.) He purchases a saint's face mask, custom altered to bear the mark of true love. While viewing his new look in the reflection of a brook, he sees Jenny, leaps across the brook and proposes marriage. Jenny accepts.

Starting with signing the marriage register as "George Heaven," Lord George makes a total moral conversion by returning ill-gotten wealth to gamblers he had cheated to the rightful owners, donating excess money to charities. He then buys a woodman's cottage to live a quiet, modest existence.

One month after the marriage, La Gambogi shows up and refuses to leave until she is granted one last look at Lord George's true face. His former lover tears off George's mask and it turns out that his face has assumed the contours of the mask. La Gambogi leaves the couple happily kissing as the mask melts in the sun.

I would suggest that this is the purpose of baptism for us, to put on the mask of Christ so that in time we become one with the mask. In such divine "dress-up" we no longer just talk about becoming children of God, we are, in fact, transformed into children of God.

I have always regretted that we don't have baptism by immersion in the Episcopal Church. For the sake of expediency and propriety I think we sacrifice a powerful symbol of transformation - entering the water as one person and coming up out of it as another person:

dying to the old life, rising to new life in Christ, cleansed, renewed, reborn.

In order to get in touch with the impact of that transformation, let me suggest that we use our imaginations with the Gospel lesson today to examine Jesus' transformation in baptism. Many Gospel commentators suggest that this moment of Jesus' baptism, his affirmation by the presence of the Spirit and the Father's voice, was truly the confirmation for Jesus of his messiahship.

Imagine, if you will, Jesus wending his way across the desert, stepping over the scrubby, parched brush and uneven terrain, approaching the Jordan River where John the Wild Baptist preaches warning and repentance to the crowd. Now, John would have made any T.V. evangelist pale by comparison. He's just told his congregation they're a pack of snakes and if they don't shape up it's all over except for the shouting. Mid-sentence he looks up and his heart nearly stops beating. His words fade to a whisper as he sees the One whose sandals he was not worthy to untie heading straight for his particular puddle in the Jordan. As Jesus announced his intent to be baptized and he and John waded out deeper into the water, John knew he was in deeper water of another kind. Whether or not Jesus' baptism was the transformative moment of his self-awareness as the Messiah, Jesus, like all of us, emerged from his baptism not so much new, but perhaps **more** - more of who he was, more of who God was in him. That, my friends, is what we can hope for as a result of our baptism – that through this sacrament God becomes more in us and we in him.

Remember the story of The Little Prince? In this story the Little Prince has a rose whom he cares for a great deal. But this rose is quite vain and consequently very difficult to love. The Prince gets some help on this problem from a fox whom he meets in the desert. The fox asks the Little Prince to tame him, which he does, and in return the fox gives the Little Prince a secret.

This is the fox's secret: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye... You are responsible forever for what you have tamed." On hearing this, the Little Prince suddenly understands that he loves his rose and that he has tamed her; and, he is responsible for her.

I guess baptism is a little like the fox's secret. It is a mystery that we can only see rightly with our hearts, for it calls for faith, a response of love, which is really a matter of the heart. Imagination, too, dressing up and putting on Christ is a matter of the heart. What is essential in baptism is invisible to the eye. We need the symbol of water to help us understand how faith washes us clean, helps us put on the mask of Christ, makes us children of God and members of the Christian community.

And in a very particular way, like the Little Prince, we become responsible for what we have tamed. Every time we baptize new people into the community of faith, we make a public promise to support the newly baptized in their life in Christ. They become a part of us, as we are the Church. They become family. We promise to care for them, to teach them of love and acceptance and belonging. We promise to teach them of God and to share with them Jesus' life among us in Word and Sacrament.

When we renew our baptismal vows in the context of the eucharistic community, we are re-membering ourselves as the Body of Christ, reminding ourselves and one another that we have promised to care for one another, to teach one another of God's love and acceptance and belonging through Jesus' life still lived among us in Word and Sacrament.

So let us proceed to celebrate the memory of God's holy invitation to us in the renewal of our baptismal vows. Let us play divine dress-up in our remembering and in our renewal. Let us once again put on Christ, and commit ourselves again to be His own forever.