

"POWERFUL LIVING"
January 13, 1991

TEXT: Mark 1:11 "And a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."

Rufus Jones, the renowned Quaker author and educator, wrote, "I am told that when the great Hellgate bridge was being built over the East River in New York, the engineers came upon an old derelict ship lying embedded in the river mud, just where one of the central piers of the bridge was supposed to go No tugboat could be found that was able to . . . [pull it] from its ancient bed in the ooze. It would not move, no matter what force was applied.

"Finally one of the workers hit upon this scheme. He took a large flatboat which had been used to bring stone down the river, and he chained it to the old sunken ship when the tide was low. Then he waited for the great tidal energies to do their work. "Slowly the tide, with all the forces of the ocean behind it . . . came up under the flatboat, raising it inch by inch. And as it came up . . . the derelict came up with it, until it was entirely out of the mud. . . ."

Then he added (and this is the point), "There are greater forces than those tidal energies waiting for us to use for our tasks." Now, that is good news, for who of us has never faced some problem or situation in which we longed for a strength far greater than our own? To know such power exists is good news, but two problems still exist: where do we find that power, and what must we do to lay hold of it?

In seeking answers to these questions, one place to start is with this morning's scripture, the story of Jesus' baptism. Like the rest of us, Jesus had many sources of power in his life: prayer, scripture, the encouragement of friends, the example of those who had gone before. But basic to everything else were two things he learned about himself at his baptism: who he was and why he was here. That knowledge opened up sources of strength in his life which allowed him to do things no one else has ever done. And knowing who we are and why we are here gives power to our lives, too.

Consider, for instance, the matter of who we are. Carl Sandburg once told the graduating class at a Harvard commencement, "You need the spirit of Lincoln, who in the divided house of his day knew what to do because he knew who he was." What we do with life, and how well we do it, depend to a large extent on who we understand ourselves to be.

If we see ourselves merely as animals, for instance, sophisticated and intelligent animals perhaps, but animals just the same, then we will probably live like animals. That is what many people seem to do these days. Nothing matters to them except meeting their animal needs. They care very little about others and nothing about ultimate values. Their motto seems to be: "If it feels good, do it." And, because they see life as "dog eat dog", they seek their own good no matter what the cost to others.

If you do not know anyone like that personally, all you have to do is turn on the TV or look at the morning paper to see what I mean. Greed and passion seem to be their only motives, and the survival of the fittest (by which they mean the strongest) is the only way they know how to live.

And if you think you are a nobody, then your power for living is going to be severely limited. One of the words I least like to hear from people is the word, "only." "I am only a housewife." "I am only a layman." "I am only one person; what can I do? If you think you are a nobody then you are likely to live like a nobody.

But, in this morning's scripture, Jesus heard a voice from heaven saying, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." He was not just an animal; he was not a nobody. He was a child of God." And the "good news" is that so are we. After the resurrection, Jesus said to Mary Magdalene, ". . . Go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." (John 20:17) And John's Gospel affirms from the beginning that "to all game they know how to play.who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:12)

Of course, baptism does not make us children of God, it just affirms that this is what we are. It defines who we are. And, as children of God, our lives take on a new meaning. We are not just chance collections of molecules in an indifferent, or even hostile, universe. We are children of God, beloved by our Creator. And, for that reason, we can put our trust, not only in God, but in God's creation. We can dare to be and to do because we matter. And, by the way, so do those around us.

One of Jesus' most endearing qualities was his refusal to define people the way so many others did. He did not see them as prostitutes, or tax collectors, or sinners, or Samaritans. He saw them as children of God, and, as such, of infinite value. If we see people as Jesus saw them, we will have power with them. Not power over them to use and exploit them, but the power of fellowship and love that enables us to work together.

And Jesus' baptism also showed him why he was here. In that day it was taken for granted that a son would follow in his father's footsteps. The sons of a shepherd were expected to be shepherds. The sons of a shopkeeper were expected to be

shopkeepers. The sons of a fisherman were expected to be fishermen. And Jesus was a carpenter because Joseph was a carpenter.

By the same token, a son of God follows in God's footsteps, He or she does God's work, serves God's kingdom. The moment Jesus understood that he was God's son, whether as a boy of twelve as Luke's Gospel supposes or at his baptism as we see in Mark, at that moment his life's work was laid out for him. In John 4:34 he says, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work." And again in chapter five, verse thirty: "I can do nothing on my own authority . . . because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me."

He was liberated from the vast confusion of things he might have done. He was empowered to focus on that one purpose for which he had been born. The power of focus is one of the great gifts in life. I remember when I was in high school and my English teacher would assign a theme every other week or so. Sometimes she would say, "I want you to write a five page theme on Alaska." Or on goldfish, or the St. Louis World's Fair. And I would go to the encyclopedia or the reference librarian, get some information, and begin to write the theme.

But sometimes, thinking she was being nice to us, she would say, "I want you to write a five page theme on any subject you want." Then, instead of having some specific focus, we were burdened with a whole universe of choices. Most of you can probably guess what happened. We spent much more time trying to decide what to write about than we spent writing the theme, itself. We were overwhelmed with choices and, as a result, we did not choose any until we absolutely had to do so.

But Jesus knew why he was here. Maybe he had to think through some of the specifics. That is what the temptation in the wilderness was all about. But as soon as he understood himself to be the son of God, he had at least a general idea of what he was to do.

Now, you and I are children of God, too. And we, too, are called to "be about our Father's business." In John 9:4 Jesus says, "We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work." And in chapter twenty, verse twenty-one, he says, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you."

Like Jesus, we may have to think through some of the specifics, but, in general, we know what we are here to do. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to preach good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19)

When Woodrow Wilson was a boy his mother said to him again and again, "Tommy, never forget that you are a Woodrow." Perhaps that is why in later years he chose to be known by his middle name. And I would guess that there are many people here this morning who did not even know that his first name was Thomas.

Don't you ever forget that you are a child of God. Knowing who we are and why we are here not only lets us live with purpose but with power as well. For the greatest power in the world is the power of a good example.