

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
December 6, 2020 Streaming Mass
Advent 2nd Sunday of Year B Mk 1:1-8

Today, on this second Sunday of Advent, as we await the celebration of Him who is our Savior, let us pause for a few minutes to reflect on precisely what He comes to save us from. And, do we even feel that we need to be saved; do we want to be saved, and saved from what? Frederick Beuchner, the well-known Presbyterian minister and author, reflects on this topic by citing a great Hindu saint of the 19th century, a man by the name of Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna used to tell a fable about an orphaned tiger cub that was adopted and raised by goats. The goats taught the tiger cub to speak their goat language, to copy their goat ways, to eat their goat food, and in general they led the cub to believe that he himself was a goat. Then one day a Tiger King arrived, and after all the goats had scattered in fear, the young tiger cub was left alone to confront the Tiger King, afraid and yet somehow unafraid. The Tiger King asked the cub why did he conduct himself so shamefully, masquerading as a goat. Of course, the cub didn't understand what he meant; all he could do in response was to bleat nervously and keep nibbling at the grass. So, the Tiger King carried the cub to a nearby pond where he forced the cub to look at their reflections side-by-side in the water, and draw his own conclusions, but to no avail. When this didn't work, the Tiger King offered the cub his first piece of raw meat. At first the young tiger recoiled from its unfamiliar taste, but as he ate more and more he began to feel his blood getting warmer and warmer, and the truth of who he was gradually became clear. Lashing his tail and digging his claws into the ground, the young beast finally raised his head high, and the jungle trembled at the sound of his exultant roar.

The point of this little fable is that we tend to settle for a lot less than we really are, a lot less than we were created to be. The goat is not really a goat at all—he is really a tiger; except that he does not know that he is, with the result that for a time he is not really a tiger either. In other words, each of us was created in the image of God, but along the way something has gotten messed up. Like a mirror with a crack down the middle, we reflect an image that is distorted. We were created to serve God and one another in love, but instead each of us in turn chooses to serve himself or herself as god. So, our relationships with God and with each other have been set awry. Like Adam and Eve forced to live east of Eden, we carry the memory of Paradise within us in the form of a longing, of a bliss that is no more, or the dream of a bliss that may someday come again. Some of you may remember the 60's lyric, "We gotta get back to the garden."

We tend to settle for a lot less than we could be, but there is a problem. To return to the fable, if the tiger who thinks he is a goat could only be a goat, then everything for him would be fine. But there is still just enough of the tiger in him, just enough of the "image of God" in us to make us discontented with our "goathood." We try to survive on a diet of grass, but it is never quite enough to fill us; we bleat well enough, but deep down there is the suspicion we were meant for roaring. The question is how do we bridge the gap between what we have been told we are, told what we are supposed to be, and the intuition of what we feel we could be. ***Most often we try to solve the problem by denying it, and the attempts at a resolution take many forms.***

For some, the solution is to turn the fable around and say the problem with our human condition, the problem with the goat, is that he has a guilt complex because he is not a tiger. These would suggest, accept your "goathood" with all of its compromises and limitations because a goat is simply all that you are, all that you will ever be. Recognize the fact that this tiger business is just an illusion, a neurosis, and try to be a well-adjusted goat: settle for the ordinary, the mundane, the trivial. Still, the intuition remains that we are tigers, that we are meant for something more. Others would recommend just try not to think about it, i.e., this difficulty of living as a goat when the goat happens to be oneself. They would tell us, that even when the most succulent grass does not fill the emptiness within, and when the sound of our own bleating, our self-pity, begins to grate on our ears, turn on the TV, or have a good stiff drink, just or try to keep busy. But not even the finest food, drugs, or sex, or the busiest schedule can provide a permanent solution. Those more moralistically inclined would suggest that it is not so bad to live as a goat, if the goat can be housebroken. Make him a good little goat, a law-abiding goat, a moral goat. But morality can be just another kind of grass to fill the emptiness within. For the man or woman of unimpeachable conduct can be joyless, can be more off-course than most, if just being "good" is what life is all about. All the solutions offered, whether they be based on psychology, or escapist pleasure-seeking, or a rigid moralism, are bound to fail.***

The solution comes in hearing and accepting the "good news" of Jesus Christ. The Christian is the one who has seen the Tiger. T.S. Eliot wrote, "In the juvenescence of the year comes Christ the Tiger." This image of Christ, as Tiger, is powerful because it cuts through so much of the phoniness of life. This is not the doe-eyed, sugar-sweet, air-brushed Jesus of holy-card sentimentality, but the explosion of the God-man into human history, the explosion of Life itself into life. When we look at this Jesus, this

Christ, we are distracted from our grazing. Suddenly we see what a Tiger looks like, what an authentic human being looks like. Then, what am I? If this is true life, then what is this that I have been living?

How do we live with ourselves, what do we say to ourselves? We say, "This is a Someone as I am not. This is the life I do not live, cannot live. I am a goat and live in a world of goats. I adjust myself to my world. I make its standards my standards, its wisdom my wisdom, its goals my goals. And I discover that my world adjusts me to itself; where it cannot break me in, it breaks me off, it breaks me up." If Jesus is just an example we are supposed to follow, then He is a curse because none of us can follow Him, but that is not the whole story. Jesus comes as the One who has the power to turn goats into tigers, to give life to the half-alive, even to the dead. What He asks for when He says, "Come, follow Me," He has the power to give, and that is the life-saving power of God, the power He has, the power He is, as God's Anointed One.

In today's Gospel, John the Baptist is depicted as speaking to goats who are not quite content to remain in their "goathood." People from the surrounding countryside, those who live in Jerusalem, have come down to the river to be baptized, to have their sins forgiven, to have them washed away. But, there is something wrong with this picture. The usual way that a pious Jew would have their sins forgiven was to offer some sort of sacrifice in the Temple. John has been saying that that is not going to work any more. Even though his father, Zachary, had been a priest in the Temple, John is telling them that that whole system is corrupt. John is doing for them what only the priests in the Temple were supposed to be able to do, *viz.*, forgive sins. But John tells them that is not enough. To return to the fable for a moment, he can only help them live *as "housebroken goats,"* as well-behaved goats, as moral goats. He baptizes only with "water," but the One who will come after him--the thongs of whose sandals, John says, he is not worthy to stoop and loosen--"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." He will empower them to live as who they really are, as children of God, as authentic human beings.

As I said a few minutes ago, the point of that fable is that we may settle for less than who we really are, than what we can be. We may settle for a religion that is nice and comfortable, convenient, a sort of glue that holds the pieces of our lives together. That kind of religion can be like furniture that is always there, that we ignore most of the time, until we want to sit on something. It serves our needs up to a point. It may be that we have come to expect so little out of it, that God has become just a Moral-Enforcer to keep us, and everyone else, on the straight-and-narrow, or a Cosmic Butler we call upon to answer our specific needs.

The “good news” of today’s Gospel is that Jesus comes as the Lord of Life, the One who has the power to transform us, to enable us to become the heroic kinds of people we could be; to see through the fake and the phony to what really matters in life, not making decisions on the basis of fear but living with courage, hope and love; to heal us of our hurts, our resentments, our rages, our lusts; to be at peace with who and what we are, while always striving to be more. It is the message of Christmas, more than holyday cheer. It is to live as a child of God; it is to find our true self. It is the salvation Jesus offers to us, if we are willing to accept it.