

The worst thing preachers can do  
is make the sermon all about themselves,  
I don't want to do that, and yet,  
I need to tell you about how  
I approach preaching,  
the way I engage with Holy Scripture,  
not just so my sermons will (hopefully)  
make some sense to you,  
but because it's the way I pray,  
which is the sort of thing  
we should talk to each other about.

Two things, then, that you need to know -  
First, I am an unrepentant  
church and liturgy nerd.

Part of what that means,  
is that when it comes to preaching,  
I follow not just the Sunday lectionary  
But also the church calendar.

I love the calendar,  
how it shapes our interaction  
with the narrative of God's  
plan of redemption for all creation.

We have readings appointed  
for each Sunday -  
y'all know that already,  
but each Sunday is set within  
a particular season,  
and each season has its own tone -  
that tone tells us where we are,  
in our journey with Jesus  
through his life.

The calendar of the Church year  
marks where we are,  
where we have been,  
And where we are going,  
as we walk with  
the God who is, and who was,  
and who is to come.

The second thing you need to know  
about me is that I am Ignatian at heart.

Not sure if you're familiar with  
Ignatius of Loyola,  
but he founded the Jesuit order  
in the 16th century.

I was first formally introduced to  
Ignatian spirituality by my  
Spiritual Director back in Baton Rouge.

Two things about the "Ignatian Way,"  
and then we can get on to  
the actual homily for today.

Ignatius focused on  
the practice of discernment,  
particularly the discernment  
of spirits.

We think of discernment as being about  
making good decisions -  
and it is -  
but it's ultimately about  
a deeper and more profound  
relationship with God,  
from which wise and faithful  
decision making flows.

Discernment is the practice of distilling,  
and responding to  
God's call to each of us  
in our own lives.

Ignatius believed  
That God calls to us through  
the authentic desires of our hearts,  
and - this is the most important  
bit for today -  
through our imaginations.

Ignatius invited his companions  
to engage the Scriptures  
and their life of prayer,  
with the full force of their imagination.

To picture themselves in the stories  
of the Gospels,  
to hear, and smell, and feel  
everything that was happening  
around them,  
and to wonder -  
what would Jesus have said to me,  
if i were there?  
What conversations might we have?

So, with all that in mind,  
we turn, finally,  
To today's homily.

This is the 1st Sunday after the Epiphany.  
We started the Christian year 6 weeks ago  
with the 1st Sunday of Advent.  
We heard the prophets  
mainly Isaiah and John the Baptist,  
calling us to prepare  
the Way for the Messiah.

Then we were in Christmas,  
with the Incarnation -  
the mystery of the Word Made Flesh,  
and the familiar birth story  
- with Mary and Joseph,  
the shepherds and the angels.

When most of the world  
was celebrating New Year's Day,  
in the Church we marked  
the Feast of the Holy Name,

In which the child was given  
the name of Jesus,  
which literally means "He saves."

Last Sunday here, you heard the Epiphany,  
the Magi coming to find  
the one born King of the Jews,  
they represent the gift of salvation  
to those outside the covenant,

All of this has been about Revelation -  
about showing Jesus to be,  
The shoot of the stump of Jesse,  
The Word made Flesh,  
the child lying in the manger,  
the Messiah who is come to save us,  
the King who will choose a cross  
rather than a throne.

The rest of this season of Epiphany,  
from now until Ash Wednesday,  
continues to unfold that revelation  
showing us what it means for Jesus  
to bear all those names and titles,  
as we walk with him,  
to Jerusalem and the cross.

But in this day, as we celebrate his baptism,  
we hear God name Jesus  
as something else -  
as his Son, his beloved.

And in good Ignatian fashion,  
I want to invite you to  
let loose your imaginations.  
Can you see yourself standing  
on the banks of the River Jordan?

What does the river sound like,  
How fast does it flow?

What does the water look like,  
Is it clear or turbulent?  
What does it feel like to hear  
that voice from heaven,  
when Jesus came up from the water?

Can you see his face? His eyes?  
Does he turn and look at you,  
with water running down his beard?  
What might Jesus say to you  
in that moment?

Now, imagine  
that you're at your own baptism,  
if you don't remember it,  
picture it however you want.

As you come up from the water,  
what does God say to you?  
How does God name you?

How does that name differ  
From the ones we give ourselves,  
or from the names the world  
would attach to us?

We collect all sorts of names,  
don't we? Some helpful,  
some not.

Sticks and stones  
may break my bones,  
but names will never hurt me -  
so not true.

Those names we carry around,  
the ones that hurt us?  
Don't know what yours are,  
but for me, it's things like  
Less Than, Not Enough,  
Beyond Saving.

Ignatius would tell us  
that those voices,  
come from the spirits  
we need *not* listen to,  
they're the voice of the Deceiver.

But the names that tell us  
who we truly are -  
Beloved, Desired, Redeemed -  
those are the sorts of names  
God speaks to us  
from our baptism.

Our real names,  
that reveal and reflect  
our true selves,  
those are the names that reveal,  
how God knows us.

And the voices who call us  
by *those* names -  
they're the ones worth  
Listening to,  
because they speak  
with the voice of God.

It was this place,  
this community,  
the people here,  
who were the first  
to help me hear  
the true voice of God.

It may have been a Louisiana  
Spiritual Director,  
who taught me what  
Ignatian spirituality  
was called,

But it was you,  
who taught me how,  
with my heart and imagination,  
to hear the voice of the living God.

I may have been baptized  
down the street,  
but it was here that God spoke  
to me when he drew me up  
from the water.

This is the gift God has given us here -  
a place to discover who we really are,  
who God has named us to be.  
His voice still speaks loudly  
and clearly enough for all to hear,  
if we will listen,  
for he will never stop calling us  
by the names he has given us -  
His own beloved.