

Between God and Satan

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the first Sunday in Lent, February 16, 1997. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I asked the young woman how her new job was going. She'd just graduated from college. She'd been working for several months. "How do you like your new job?" I asked. "So far, so good. But I'm still on probation. I have to work for six months on a trial basis. At the end of the six month period, my supervisor will evaluate me. She'll recommend whether or not I achieve permanent status." She went on to say, "I think I've performed pretty well so far. No major mistakes. But I still worry." That's a pretty standard policy. You get hired on a trial basis. The probation period comes first, than the acceptance.

It's the same way with getting accepted to college. Several months ago, I asked one of Andrew's friends if she'd heard anything yet from West Point. She wanted to go to West Point. "Well, she said. I got my recommendation from Congressman Walker. My SAT tests were acceptable. I've had an interview. I passed the physical. But I haven't officially heard if I've been accepted." A week later I asked her again, "Have you heard anything from West Point?" She beamed proudly and said, "I got accepted." She was tested first - all kinds of tests - then she got accepted. That's how it usually works.

It's the same way in a court trial. Whoever heard of a the defendant being acquitted before the trial begins. ^{The trial comes first, then the verdict} The jury ^{first} listens and weighs the evidence. The trial ends and the jury deliberates. The trial comes first, then comes the verdict.

We're all familiar with the pattern - we're tested first, then we're accepted or rejected. We're so used to the pattern that we're tempted to think that God accepts us on the basis of how well we've done on the test. ^{How can we change temptations} But that's not the Gospel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ declares that we're accepted first, and then we're tested.

Take Jesus as the prime example. Our Gospel lesson tells us that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan.

Did you hear the sequence of events? First, at his baptism, Jesus is pronounced the Son of God. God is pleased with him. He's ^{proven his worth first, then comes the trial,} accepted first. Then he's tempted. God works so differently than we work. And I'm so glad. That's what makes the Gospel of Jesus Christ such good news. God accepts us unconditionally. Before we've passed any test, he assures us that we're his beloved son or daughter. ^{Before the trials we experience}

One of the clearest signs of the Gospel is when we baptize an infant. A little baby can't believe. Can't repent. Can't do anything to earn acceptance. Yet I take that little baby in my arms and baptize her in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I declare to her, "Child of the covenant. You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own

forever." You are accepted. The rest of her life she'll be tempted and tested but, before she passes or fails those tests, she is accepted.

God's way is, first, to accept us before we've passed or failed any tests. Last Thursday night Jim Sumner passed out a paper describing a study conducted by the National Presbyterian Youth Ministry Council. The study found that two of the most important questions young people are asking are: "Who am I?" And "Do I belong?" A major task of adolescence is to answer those questions. Young people are trying to figure out who they are, *and where they belong* And significant numbers of young people in our congregations feel that they don't belong. Congregations where youth ministry is thriving, whether it's a group of eight or 80, are congregations where young people know who they are and feel they belong, feel they're important to the ministry of Jesus Christ.

The great temptations appearance is the tempter
Will our young people be tempted to believe that their worth depends on how well they pass tests: "Am I smart enough? Am I beautiful enough? Am I cool enough? Am I good enough? Is my identity based primarily on my sexuality or my clothing or my popularity?" The Gospel declares that our identity is not found in those things. God gives us our identity. "You are my son. You are my daughter. Unconditionally. I am well pleased with you. You are accepted before you pass or fail any tests." *And God gives us a sense of belonging. In life and in death we belong to God.*

In the wilderness, the devil tried to destroy the identity of Jesus. The devil wanted Jesus to forget who he was. The devil wants us to forget who we are, *to whom we belong* wants us to forget our baptism. When we're baptized Christ assures us that we belong to him.

Baptized in water, Sealed by the Spirit,
Marked with the sign of Christ, our King;
Born of the Spirit, We are God's children,
Joyfully now God's praises we sing.

I have a friend who told me that when he was a teenager his father would put both hands on his shoulders before he left for a date. His father would look into his eyes and say, "Remember who you are tonight, son. Remember, you belong to Christ." And my friend said, "Sometimes I didn't want to belong to Christ. I wanted to belong to myself. But" he said, "wherever I went and whoever I was with, and whatever temptations I experienced, I would hear my father telling me, 'Remember who you are.' His words spared me a lot of trouble."

Before Jesus left to begin his ministry his father looked him in the eyes and said, "Remember that you're my beloved son. I'm pleased with you. No matter what happens to you, no matter what temptations face you, remember that you're my son and you belong to me."

Like Jesus, we who are part of the church have been baptized. The words have been said to us, 'You are a daughter of God. You are a son of God.'" You have been accepted. You have been adopted ^{especially when temptations beset, tried} into Christ's family. You belong to Christ. Remember! Never forget! When you're in the wilderness, and Satan is whispering in your ear, remember who you are and believe the good news.

Let us pray: God of the covenant, as the forty days of deluge swept away the world's corruption and watered new beginnings of righteousness and life, so in the saving flood of Baptism we are washed clean and born again. Throughout these forty days, unseal within us the wellspring of your grace, cleanse our hearts of all that is not holy, and cause your gift of new life to flourish once again. Grant this through Jesus Christ our Redeemer, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.