

“KNOW YOUR IDENTITY”

Matthew 3:13-17 January 8th, 2017

The abduction of Elizabeth Smart is well-known, as are many of the details of her story. In mid-summer 2002, Elizabeth was kidnapped from her Salt Lake City bedroom under cover of darkness by Brian David Mitchell, a deranged, messianic drifter. She was taken to his camp deep in the woods, where she was brutalized by Mitchell and his wife, Wanda Barzee. For nine months, Elizabeth endured her captivity, until in March of 2003 she was recognized on a Salt Lake City street and freed.

This story is well-known publicly since the events occurred a decade ago. But it was not widely known until more recently how boldly Mitchell and Barzee paraded through Elizabeth Smart’s own neighborhood with Elizabeth in tow. Scott Carrier, a neighbor and a parent of one of Elizabeth’s classmates, reported in *Mother Jones* magazine, “Through the summer Elizabeth’s photo hung in every window of every shop and on every lamp post. Her father and her family appeared regularly on local, national and international news programs, begging and weeping for her safe return. It seemed she was hidden somewhere far away, somewhere beyond the reach of the media, or like in *The Wizard of Oz* where Dorothy’s family calls to her through the crystal ball. Then, where she was found nine months later...we realized she’d actually been right here in front of us, walking around downtown, reading in the library, eating in fast-food restaurants...They began coming into the city by day, passing within a quarter-mile of Elizabeth’s home ...and no one figured it out.”

Elizabeth later attested that she would not, could not, cry out and reveal her name, because she believed Brian Mitchell’s threat to kill her and her family. Of

all those around her, only her captor, the near-demonic Mitchell, knew her name. But she never forgot who she was. She knew her identity, even when no one else recognized her.

Halfway through Matthew's gospel, Jesus asks his disciples to identify him. By that time, Jesus has traveled the countryside preaching hope to hopeless people. He has extended a healing touch to those cast off by society. He has told cryptic stories of judgment that seem to be aimed at those in power. People have begun to whisper about who Jesus might be and what he's up to. And so, in a side moment, when Jesus is with his disciples away from the crowd, he asks them, "Who do people say that I am?"

The fact is that people aren't sure. The disciples respond that people think Jesus might be John the Baptist reincarnated, or Elijah, or another of the prophets. So Jesus pursues the question and asks them, "Who do *you* say that I am?" And Peter—bumbling, brash Peter—responds, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Very soon after that, Jesus is transfigured before Peter, James, and John and God's own voice from heaven *confirms* in their hearing the true identity of Jesus.

This is when Jesus' identity is made know publicly and explicitly, when others begin to recognize accurately who Jesus is. But long before Peter's proclamation is Jesus' *own* recognition of his identity. Jesus has known who he is since his baptism, since today's Gospel passage, since John immerses him in water and—to Jesus alone in Matthew's telling, to only Jesus' eyes and ears—the heaven of God opens and God's own Spirit alights upon Jesus, anchoring within the creation the Trinitarian connection that has, in truth, existed since before time. Today, God's own voice names Jesus, saying, "You are my Son, with whom I am well-pleased."

For thirteen chapters, then, from now until Peter's proclamation in the middle of the gospel, Jesus must walk through the world—including during a trip home to Nazareth on the streets of his own neighborhood—knowing who he is but unable to cry out his identity, unable to share his true nature. Throughout all that time, he is a stranger to those who claim to love him. In what must be a cruel irony for Jesus, only the demons he encounters recognize him for who he truly is.

It is a common literary theme: the character who knows his identity but cannot declare it, who must walk through the world hidden in plain sight. It is a painful thing, difficult to read or watch. Strider is secretly Aragorn, the heir to the throne of men in *Lord of the Rings*. He lives in shadow, conflicted about the discovery of his true name. Clark Kent is really Superman. His alternating urges to reveal himself and to remain in disguise so conflict him that he removes and replaces his eyeglasses as a nervous tic. And more recently, we have Supergirl, who sacrifices a great deal to remain a secret heroine.

What would it be like to walk through the world in this way, hidden in plain sight, unrecognized even by those who love us?" But we already know the answer to that question because for many of us, it can be the agonizing truth. We may travel the streets of our hometowns, the hallways of our workplaces, even the rooms of our very homes, with our true identities unknown to any but ourselves.

Think about how often both the accolades and the criticism you receive seem to you to be spoken about someone else, about some stranger who only vaguely reminds you of yourself. Consider when your most beloved gazes upon your face and you know full well that he or she is really looking at a mask. Remember those times when you believe if the world just knew the real you it would love

you and rejoice in you, along with those times when you feel quite sure if the world knew the real you it would step back in fear and disgust. Think of the times you want to cry out your identity, to rip Clark Kent's glasses from your nose, to emerge from the shadows and claim your true name. And admit the irony that the only ones who truly seem to know you—the *real* you—are your demons; your self-doubts, your anxieties, your weakness toward vice. The demons know your identity, even when no one else does.

Except that today, above all other days, we are reminded that there is more truth than this, greater truth! On this day of the Baptism of our Lord, we are called to remember *into whom we are baptized*. At his own baptism, God spoke to Jesus, and half a Gospel later God spoke to the disciples, saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

That only is truly Jesus. *That* is his identity. And in baptism, in this sacrament that rehearses the action to which Jesus consented at the hands of John the Baptist, Jesus' identity becomes *our own true selves*. We emerge from the water reborn into him. Just in case we forget, baptism is not primarily about the opportunity to unpack granddad's traditional christening gown or take family photos or eat good cake. Baptism is the sacrament in which we declare—in which *God* declared—that we no longer need Clark Kent's glasses. We no longer need to curb our tongues from declaring who we are. We no longer need to duck into the shadows for fear of exposure to the world. Because who we are—who you and I truly are—are the sons and daughters of God. That identity is etched upon us more deeply than any mask. Its beauty smooths all ugliness. Its truth silences the mocking laughter of the demons.

It turns out that even we did not know ourselves. What we secretly thought

we were, in both our best and our worst moments, was wrong. We are neither the expert or the fraud, the angel nor the monster, the beauty nor the beast. The truth of us is far simpler and far more glorious. We are the baptized, bearing the seal of the Holy Spirit upon our brows just as the dove alighted on Jesus. We can walk the streets of our neighborhoods, the hallways of our workplaces, the rooms of our homes—indeed, we can look in the mirror—and say, “Look at me, the *real* me. I am a child of God. I am beloved, and with me God is well pleased.”

Now I would ask that you turn to the Reaffirmation of our Baptismal Covenant as we join together in celebration of this glorious gift to us...