

Later today we will be celebrating the becoming of five individuals. Bishop Alexander will be baptizing Matthew Sparman and Michael Ward, and will be receiving Joann Taylor and George and Donna Reed. Through water and the laying on of hands they will become one with the Body of Christ, one with us. In this we celebrate God's ongoing creation in their lives, and we who are gathered now – separated from them only by time - are reminded that we too are a work in progress. We are all "becoming."

Becoming is a process of passing from one way of being to another, passing through thresholds. Our gospel reading from John is about just such passages. In fact it describes well the lifelong goal of our "becoming." Just before our reading begins Jesus gives sight to a man born blind. Jesus is at the center of a contentious dialogue about this act, about who this healed man is, and about who is the one who healed him. Jesus responds to their questions with this beautifully poetic discourse about sheep and sheepfolds, gates and shepherds. In this parable we – the children of God – are sheep. Well, now this may feel problematic right from the start. Who wants to be a sheep? Sheep are mindless, bleating, passive, timid creatures. Sheep go against every grain of how we define ourselves in our culture. We are Americans. We are Eagles. Our teams are Bulldogs and Yellow Jackets and Tigers. We are the victor, not the victim. I am sure that this description did not sit well with the Jewish audience listening to Jesus' words. They were bristling against Roman occupation. But Jesus is not asking them or us to simply identify ourselves as sheep as such. Rather we are to identify and live into the relationship between the sheep and the gate and the shepherd. Becoming is about relationship. Jesus is the gate because he is the way into the kingdom of God, that place of profound and deep relationship with God. If we are not in relationship with that the gate as followers, if we are not engaging the way, then we are surely moving away from God, and our becoming has halted. But we also become sheep in relationship to Jesus as shepherd. We do not become passive, and dumb, and fearful. Rather we become as we learn to discern Jesus' voice in the plethora of competing sounds. We become as we obey God's loving will for us. We become as we recognize that we are not independent agents, but rather interdependent, in loving relationship with God and one another. And Jesus assures us that as we engage in this relationship with him we gain life, and have life abundantly. We become whom God created us to be. We become our true selves.

To be baptized, to be received, is an act of surrender. You know this. Becoming our true selves involves our increasing awareness that we belong solely and wholly to God. We really are God's possession and no one else's. There is but one who has known us since before we were knit in our mother's womb. There is but one Shepherd's voice. Discerning the Shepherd's voice may be the hardest part of becoming, and it is a lifelong education. Your voice is not the Shepherd's voice. My voice is not the Shepherd's voice. Your friends' and peers' voices are not the Shepherd's voice. If you are a soldier, the army's voice is not the Shepherd's voice. If you are a priest – God forbid – the bishop's voice is not the Shepherd's voice. If you are a teacher, the board of education's voice is not the Shepherd's voice. If you are married, your spouse's voice and your children's voices are not the Shepherd's voice. This is hard, isn't it? Please don't misunderstand me; we are not to discard these other voices. We all need these other voices to help us learn to distinguish God's voice, and frequently these other voices convey the Shepherd's voice to us. We just must be careful to not confuse these other voices with that of our Shepherd. Perhaps our lifelong task is to find that balance between meeting the obligations and needs and demands of our community while still listening and moving toward the Shepherd's voice that is calling us through the gate of our becoming. Some might call this balance "living with integrity," God and world integrated such that you and the world around you become.

The Shepherd never stops calling. I recall a woman who was passed over for a job in an institution where she had worked for 11 years. She was livid at first, infuriated that they had not seen that this was precisely the position for which she was equipping herself all those years. After some time she came to realize that she really was no longer suited for this role. She said, "I have grown through that place." Growing through – that is beautiful, isn't it? Imagine a child who has handed down to her a shirt that is much too big at first. Over time she will grow into it. But the shirt does not determine the endpoint of one's growth. She will outgrow the shirt, still wearing it for a time even though the sleeves are midway up the arm and the neckband is strangling and she just can't seem to get comfortable in the shirt. Eventually, if she's listening, she will hear that voice that says "This no longer fits. But have no fear. Try on *your* shirt." Growing in faith is something like this. Living into our baptism – as I noted earlier – is an act of surrender, of letting go of the outgrown shirt and putting on the garment of our true selves. Now this can be scary stuff. It means we must let go of those things, those stranger's voices that are comfortable dividers that separate us from experiencing the love of God. Becoming is growing through and re-clothing yourself at points along the way, mindful always of those loving voices around you but especially listening for the Shepherd's voice to guide you, the voice that calls George and Donna, Matthew, Joann, and Michael, and each and every one of us into that person God created us to be.

We must first let go to take up again. There is a nice image for this, but it requires that I make a small confession. I have always been a sucker for that television series "Kung Fu" – you know, the one from the 70's starring David Carridine – and I will watch those reruns even to this day. I'm not proud. Well, in one episode there is one of those flashback scenes, where the young Cain, "Grasshopper," is walking with the great temple master, and they come across a monkey with his hand stuck in a jar. The young Cain is greatly alarmed by this sight, and asks his master to help the poor monkey. The learned master simply states that it is entirely under the monkey's power to remove his own hand. The master offers the monkey a small grape, and the monkey slides his hand out and takes the grape. The master gently picks up the jar and tips it over. Out of the jar rolls an orange. The monkey was trying to get the fruit, but as long as he was holding the orange his hand could not possibly be withdrawn from the narrow opening of the jar. The master notes that unfortunately most people go through life yearning for that thing that they already grasp, but cannot quite have. We must first let go to take our lives up in a new way.

Becoming is not easy, and fortunately it happens in community. This lifelong process of growing through, of letting go and taking back up again, cannot possibly happen in a vacuum. We need one another to help with the discerning of voices, to indicate when the shirt is getting too tight, to point out when we are walking around with a jar on our hand. Together may we celebrate the passing of this threshold of baptism and reception for our newest members of St. Gabriel's that will happen later today. And may we continue to remind them, and remind ourselves, that to be becoming is to be beautiful.