

Our gospel reading this morning from Luke is actually part 2 of a story that is actually part 3 of a larger story. We have to remember that Luke is a master storyteller, and he is trying to tell us something incredibly important. To make better sense of what we just heard perhaps it is worthwhile looking at this larger story in some detail. And we might imagine this story as a large tri-fold picture-frame.

In the first panel we find the baptism of Jesus, of which we heard three Sundays ago. As you well know after John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan a voice from heaven proclaims, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” – emphasis on the You. This is not a message for those present, or for us. Not yet. This was a message for Jesus. In the language of our scriptures Jesus is called. He is named. Dripping with the Holy Spirit Jesus’ identity is given to him: Son of God, the Beloved.

Now, the second panel: what is Jesus to do with this identity? For most of the stories of call in the Bible there is an incubation period, a time to mull the call over. Immediately after Jesus’ baptism he is driven (that is the word used by Mark – driven) by the Holy Spirit out into the wilderness to wrestle with this identity. And we will examine this episode in greater detail in about a month, but in short the temptations placed before Jesus in the desert all ask him to earn his identity. “If you are the Son of God, do...” If you are Beloved... The temptation is to earn an alternative identity to the Belovedness Jesus already embodies.

Finally, the third panel: Jesus claims his identity and defines what “beloved” means. After the forty days in the wilderness Jesus – filled with the power of the Holy Spirit – returns to his hometown of Nazareth. As we heard last Sunday Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath and reads from the book of Isaiah who he is:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
Because he has anointed me  
To bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
And recovery of sight to the blind,  
To let the oppressed go free,  
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And then Jesus says, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” This is it, Jesus says. And from this point going forward, from his interactions with the disciples, lepers, Pharisees, bleeding women, and armed soldiers, to those crucified on his left and right Jesus lives out of this understanding of being Beloved: to be anointed, to bring good news, to proclaim release, to give the blind vision, to free the oppressed, to proclaim God’s favor.

And now for the bottom half of this third panel: the response of those who “know him best” to Jesus’ words of self-identity. We hear their admiration slowly dissolve into disbelief, and even murderous anger. At first the folks seem to be pleased with the “hometown-boy-made-good.” But Jesus states what he has been hearing since his arrival: do for us what you did for others. Do you hear it? “Earn that identity from us. We are the bestowers of identity and function. No? You are just Joseph’s boy, the carpenter’s son, carpenter yourself.” Jesus further enflames the folks by elaborating upon his identity. He aligns himself with Elijah and Elisha – which is not necessarily problematic. These are the great prophets of the Jewish tradition, forbearers of the Messiah. The problems come when Jesus points out the ministry of Elijah and Elisha among the Gentiles when Israel had people with the same needs. Jesus, the Beloved, is for the world. Now, the hometown folks don’t want to hear that. The lower half of this third panel

portrays the response to an identity of God's Beloved that does not conform to the wants and demands of the world around Jesus: a response of fear and anger so deep that it seeks to kill.

Jesus "went home," but he wasn't home. Home is that place, that way of being, where our true selves live out of the fertile soil of being beloved of God. Jesus no longer fit into their box. Theirs was the box of exclusivism, the box of legal conformity, the box of self-interest and self-devotion. They were box-builders, those hometown folks. But we must not be too quick to judge them. I know that I too am a builder of boxes. You are too. The boxes we build are the arenas where false identities are earned. We all do it. This is a part of what Keating calls the "human condition." We tend to build boxes for ourselves and for others because it is safer, it gives us a sense of control, it is more attractive. But the walls of the box stand between God and us; in such a container we cannot live out God's true will for us. Some might call box-building sin. OK. Our prayer book defines sin as "The seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation." Sounds like box-building.

What might our box look like? Well, to illustrate I might suggest a children's book called *The Big Box*. It's just a kid's story. Easily dismissed. Written by a Nobel Prize laureate – Toni Morrison, yes... But still, just a children's story... Well, let's give it a try...

*Patty and Mickey and Liza Sue  
Live in a big brown box.  
It has carpets and curtains and beanbag chairs  
And the door has three big locks.  
Oh, it's pretty inside and the windows are wide  
With shutters to keep out the day.  
They have swings and slides and custom-made beds  
And the door opens only one way.  
Their parents visit on Wednesday nights  
And you should see the stuff they get.  
Pizzas and Legos and Bubble Yum  
And a four-color TV set.  
On Christmas day  
They got a picture of the sky  
And a butterfly under glass  
An aquarium thing with plastic fish  
Made so it would last.*

The story goes on to tell about how these three end up in the box. Here's Liza's story:

*Now Liza lived in a little farmhouse  
Where only the crickets disturbed us.  
But she had too much fun in the fields all day  
And made the grown-ups nervous.  
She let the chickens keep their eggs;  
Let the squirrels into the fruit trees.  
She took the bit from the horse's mouth  
And fed honey to the bees.  
So the neighbors who loved her had a meeting one day  
To try to find a cure.  
They thought and talked and thought some more*

*Till finally they were sure.  
 "Oh Liza," they said, "you're a wonderful child  
 And we really don't want to remove you.  
 But you have to know how far to go  
 If you want grown-ups to approve you.  
 Now, the rules are clear in everybody's mind  
 So there's no need to repeat them.  
 We all agree, your parents and we,  
 That you simply can't handle your freedom."  
 Liza sat still and avoided their eyes  
 By lowering her little-girl head.  
 But she heard their words and she felt their eyes  
 And this is what she said:  
 "But I've worn my braces for three years now  
 And gave up peanut brittle  
 And I do my fractions and bottle-feed  
 The lambs when they are little.  
 Will the crows not scream and the rabbits not hop?  
 Won't the beavers chew trees when they need 'em,  
 If you shut me up and put me away  
 'Cause I can't handle my freedom?  
 I know you are smart and I know that you think  
 You're doing what is best for me.  
 But if freedom is handled just your way  
 Then it's not my freedom or free."  
 So they gave little Liza a pat on the cheek  
 And put her in the big brown box.  
 It has carpets and curtains and beanbag chairs  
 But the door has three big locks.  
 Oh, it's pretty inside and windows are wide  
 With shutters to keep out the day.  
 She has swings and slides and a water bed  
 But the door only opens one way.  
 Her parents visit on Wednesday nights  
 Right after their bingo game.  
 They bring popcorn and Chee-tos and pick-up sticks  
 And dolls that are already named.  
 For Thanksgiving she had her own stuffed duck  
 Prepared by a restaurant cook  
 And a movie camera all set up  
 With a film of a fresh-running brook.*

The Big Box. In so many ways this description illustrates our human condition, the box Jesus encountered, the boxes that seek to constrain us. Notice how Toni Morrison describes the interior of that box. There are all the creature comforts, but they are transient: consumed and then gone. And creation is reduced to a jar of dirt, plastic fish in an aquarium, a film of a fresh-water stream. The boxes of our own creation have this hallmark: they replace reality with superficiality, they

reduce relationship to a consumable product. You'll be glad to know the three children escape. They exit not through the door that opens one way; they leave through the top, which opens expansively heavenward.

We are not made to live in boxes. To escape the boxes of our own creation we too must look "heavenward," and move toward that voice that calls us "beloved child." We must escape "the box," into... what? Home. The way of being where our true selves live out of the fertile soil of being beloved of God. Yes, home. Paul describes this home well: this home is patience and kindness, never boastful. This home does not house selfishness or resentment. This home bears all things, believes all things, endures all things. This home never ends. This home is love.

How we find home and dwell there is the three-paneled spiritual journey of our life. It is that for which we are created: to find love, to dwell in love, to co-create love. Our boxes and box-building ways don't like this. Love means they must go. But it is the only way to live free of jars of dirt and plastic fish and doors that only open one way.

And so we look up. We listen. We ascend. We come home.