

## Sermon, 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, May 17, 2020, Jane A. Beebe

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.’ (John 14:18-19) +

Last week Jesus told us he is going to prepare a place for us, taking us to himself. He assures us that we know the way because he himself *is* the way. This week he promises more: we will not be left orphaned. We will not be alone. The literal translation of the Greek is: “I will not leave you as orphans.” It can also be translated as “I will not leave you bereaved,” or as it is in the King James version: “I will not leave you comfortless.” However, the Greek word used is *orphanos*. There is a strong sense that Jesus really could be speaking of a special filial relationship: that of adoption.

I began to wonder where else in Scripture adoption might be mentioned. The word “adoption” or “adopt” shows up only a handful of times. I go on alert when something is not commonly mentioned—or when it is. There are two wonderful adoption stories in the Hebrew Bible. The first—a detail I had forgotten—is Esther. In Esther chapter two we learn this: “Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his cousin, for she had neither father nor mother; the girl was fair and beautiful, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter.” (Esther 2:7) Mordecai is an adviser to King Ahasuerus (possibly a fictionalized Xerxes I from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE). Because of her

beauty, Esther is chosen as queen of Persia. She is then able to use her position to thwart palace intrigue that would have led to all the Jews being killed.

The second is Moses. We all know the story of Moses' mother hiding him until he is a few months old, placing him in a papyrus basket in the reeds on the riverbank where he is found by Pharaoh's daughter. Moses' sister watches nearby so as to be able to suggest that his own mother care for him as nurse. When he grows up, he is adopted as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. She is the one who names him Moses because as she says, "I drew him out of the water." (Exodus 2:10) Both Esther and Moses play remarkable, heroic roles in their care for the Hebrew people. It is amazing how God works through adoption in both stories to bring about his saving acts. Jesus, too, was adopted. It is through Joseph that Jesus is connected to King David's lineage. Jesus, too, was "drawn out of the water" in his baptism by John. 'And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" (Matthew 3:17) Is it any wonder Jesus has a special understanding of what it means to be adopted, of how God's saving grace could work through him?

There are several scenes in the Gospel that show some domestic details of Jesus' relationship with his mother, Mary. While Joseph still seems to be in the picture when Jesus is a child, we do not hear about him once Jesus is an adult. There is no record of Joseph's words, (although we do know of his obedience to

God). Yet I wonder what Jesus may have learned about God's love from his adoptive father, Joseph. The Christmas story in Matthew relates a dream Joseph has in which an angel says, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." (Matthew 1:20) when Joseph awakes, he does as the angel commands. St. Joseph is now remembered as the patron saint of fathers.

In the mid-2000s I was an oblate in a Benedictine Episcopal community. At the time, the community was based in Iowa, and we had our semi-annual gatherings at Conception Abbey in Missouri. I clearly remember a larger-than-life-size statue of St Joseph in front of one of the main buildings. He is depicted holding Jesus in his arms. Does Jesus have a memory of this? Is this one of the ways he learned his deep trust in God? Two of my three godchildren are adopted. In my first Christmas sermon with you, I told the story of Teddy's arrival at the airport as a baby after journeying all the way from Korea. I have a beautiful photograph of his mother holding him for the first time. I have a later memory of Ted's baptism. His dad is an Episcopal priest, and was the one holding him in his arms at the font. When Ted was a young child, he would often lie in his father's lap for Morning or Evening Prayer at home. Truly a fulfillment of Jesus' promise: "I will not leave you orphaned..."

We already know that Jesus speaks of God as his father, using the term of endearment, Abba, which is like “Daddy” or “Papa.” Jesus begins the Lord’s Prayer with “Our Father...” He has a close, loving connection to God. Last week we heard that Jesus takes this relationship a step further. When Philip asks to be shown the way to the Father, Jesus responds, “How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” (John 14:9-10) The doctrine of the Trinity can seem like a dry, theological construct. Yet here, we are presented with a reality, a relationship, that is life-giving and reciprocal.

Is it any wonder that Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” (Matthew 19:14) Jesus sometimes even refers to his disciples as “little children.” (John 13:33) In Romans, Paul tells us: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God...” (Romans 8:14-16) Through the Holy Spirit we too are invited into this reality, into this relationship of trust. We, too, are adopted. We can live in God, and God can live in us.

