

**SERMON – BAPTISM OF OUR LORD
ISAIAH 42:1-7 AND MATTHEW 3:13-17
JANUARY 12, 2020**

“LESSONS FROM PRIVATE RYAN”

In the opening scene of Stephen Spielberg’s film “*Saving Private Ryan*” – the character of James Francis Ryan, now an aging man, returns to the U.S. Military Cemetery near Normandy, France, searching for a grave. He comes upon that grave – marked with a simple white cross with the name Captain John Miller on it. Tearfully, he turns to his wife and grown children who have accompanied him on this pilgrimage and asks “*have I been a good man.*” They all seem rather bewildered by the question – but seeing tears well up on his face and recognizing desperation in his words they assure him that yes, he has been a good man. The camera then fades to the chaos of the Normandy landing, and the story of how a few handpicked soldiers, led by Captain Miller, survived that landing and went on a special mission to “*save Private Ryan.*”

Mr. Spielberg told his story by beginning with the end - not uncommon in filmmaking. It gives context to the story about to be told. We do something quite similar with our gospel readings this time of year. A few weeks ago, in Advent, we read from Matthew 11 and how John the Baptist wondered if Jesus was all that he was supposed to be. The implication of his question, issued from a prison cell, was that he had doubts that Jesus was Israel’s Messiah – the one he’d hoped would lead their nation back to prominence through a great spiritual revival. Taken on its own, this story from Matthew 11 might sound like any number of other ones in which all sorts of people misunderstood Jesus or flat out rejected that he was anything other than the latest charismatic street preacher.

We got the end of John’s story a few weeks ago – a portrait of a man wondering as any of us would I suppose as we look back on our life, if we’ve spent it the way we should – made the right calls, that sort of thing. Today we fade as it were, back to the beginning of John’s story – to a younger man full of fire and conviction, whose life had purpose and whose words were clear and confident. We hear a man who had no doubt Jesus was that Messiah of whom Isaiah spoke –on whom the Spirit of God rested and would “*faithfully bring forth justice to the nations.*”

With vim and vigor John said to the crowds who came to hear him “*I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals*”. And when this powerful one, Jesus, emerged from those same crowds and stood before John to be baptized the same way they had, John switched to reverence and humility and said “*I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?*”

Despite a confident beginning, we do well to recall that near the end of his life, John wondered, as any of us would, if he’d expended his finite and precious moments in this world making the right choices and supporting the right cause. We were asked in Matthew 11 to picture a man in contemplation of a man who had come to save him wondering if he had lived up to such a show of love.

The character of James Francis Ryan did much the same as he stared at a name on a white cross and asked his family “*have I been a good man*” - have I expended my finite and precious moments in this world worthy of the men who came to save me. When you come to the end of various times of your life, transition times, you invariably do some “taking stock” of the precious moments that have gone before. Let me give you a recent example in my own life.

Three years ago on this day I said goodbye to a congregation I had served for 12 years, and in my remarks dared wonder aloud, which preachers are loathe and probably ill-advised to do by the way - “*have I been a good pastor?*” Not a perfect one – that was and remains a no brainer. I had set that notion aside about a month out of seminary and it’s a wonder it took me that long. But by good I simply meant did I preach and teach earnestly and clearly and try to reflect in my manner a man who was perfect – who came to forgive and save you and me, Jesus Christ?

We ought to think about such now and then in regard to our callings in life, as parents, children, church members, neighbors. We remember today the baptism of Jesus, and what the gift of baptism means. Martin Luther said “*it means that our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires should be drowned through daily repentance, and that day by day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever.*” Translation – we shouldn’t wait 12 years in the case of a pastorate, or 10 or 22 or 35 in the case of a parent or spouse or child to consider how we live – but continuously, mindful always however, that the gospel of pretty clear a good person is one who lives by faith in God, and to the Christian the only day that really matters to God is this one.

Aspiring preachers are taught in seminary that it’s the Word of God that establishes this office of pastor and we do this work at the pleasure of and under the call of the congregation. It’s the same Word however, the same Gospel that creates and sustains the congregation and calls you to “*live with God in righteousness and purity forever.*” In the end, it’s that Word, Jesus Christ and our trust in it that makes good people out of sinners.

It’s that word, Jesus Christ, that has the power to make us and the congregations we form compassionate so a bruised reed we will not break or a dimly burning wick we will not quench. The hurting we will not turn away and the wondering or wavering we will support. Yet it also means we are determined to strive for righteousness and holiness – which is not an easy life, but it’s a good life – one worth living. As I begin my 4th year as your pastor, I hope that I have been a good one and I ask your forgiveness where I have not been what you expected, or have let you down. Please always remember Christ will never let us down. Which is why I know you dear Calvary will continue to be a faithful and good congregation, and why today I thank God for you. AMEN