

Easter Vigil & Baptism Homily 2008

In the name of the Resurrected Lord, Amen.

There is a tradition of humor to begin Easter preaching – in celebration after the seriousness of Lent, so here goes.

A few years ago, just shortly after Pope John Paul II had apologized to the Jewish people for the treatment of Jews by the Catholic Church over the years, Ariel Sharon, then Prime Minister of Israel, sent a proposal to the Holy See for a friendly game of golf to be played between the two leaders, or their representatives, to demonstrate the friendship and ecumenical spirit shared by the Catholics and the Jews.

The Pope met with his College of Cardinals to discuss the proposal. “Your Holiness” said one of the Cardinals, “Mr. Sharon wants to challenge you to a game of golf to show that you are old and unable to compete. I am afraid that this would tarnish our image in the world.”

The Pope thought about this and, since he had never held a golf club in his life, asked, “Don't we have a Cardinal to represent me?” “None who plays golf very well.” his assistant replied. “But there is a man named Jack Nicklaus, an American golfer, who is a devout Catholic. Maybe we could offer to make him a Cardinal, and then ask him to play Mr. Sharon as your personal representative. We would be showing our spirit of co-operation and perhaps also win the match.” Everyone agreed that this was a great idea.

The call was made. Of course, the Golden Bear was honored and he agreed to play as a representative of the Pope. The day after the match, Nicklaus called the Vatican to report on the results. “This is Cardinal Nicklaus. I have some good news and some bad news, your Holiness,” said the golfer. “Tell me the good news, Cardinal Nicklaus.” said the Pope. “Well, Your Holiness, I don't like to brag, but even though I have played some pretty terrific golf in my life, this was the best I have ever played, by far. I must have been inspired from above. My drives were long and true, my irons were accurate and purposeful, and didn't three-putt a single green. With all modesty, my play was truly miraculous.” “How can there be bad news?” the Pope asked.

Nicklaus sighed, “I lost by three strokes to Rabbi Tiger Woods.”

At one of our Wednesday evening discussions during Lent, in response to a point made in a presentation, the question was asked, “How do you define the word, ‘Christian’?” As with almost everything in this incredibly successful series, the question brought about a lot of discussion. But I'll tell you how I define “Christian.” A Christian is someone who believes in the resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ. With all due respect to my brothers and sisters of other denominations, I don't think one has to invite Jesus to be our personal Lord and Savior. I don't think one has to *do* or *say* a single thing in order to be a Christian. It is about belief. And by “believe” I do not mean, have no doubts. Belief is not the opposite of doubt, certainty is the opposite of doubt.

I *believe* that Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead on the third day after He was buried. I cannot be certain about how it happened or how it looked – I can even doubt some of the details of some of the Gospel accounts. I guess what I'm trying to say is, in order to call oneself a Christian there are no magic words to say, no particular ceremonies that have to be performed – rather, it is a matter of what one *cannot* do. No one can be a Christian and *deny* that the resurrection took place. To do so, makes Jesus a great prophet, a wonderful healer and teacher, or just a really great guy – but it takes away that which makes Christianity particular from all other faiths – the resurrection of the incarnate God from the dead.

So if all that's true, why did everybody get these beautiful children all dressed up and bring them out in the dark to have water poured over their heads? Quite simply it is because baptism, along with Holy Eucharist, is one of our two principal sacraments. Baptism and Eucharist are outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace. In baptism we will take Brandt and Easton figuratively down into the waters of death with Christ, and we will bring them out on the other side, reborn in the Spirit and made spiritually brand spanking new by the experience. Then we will seal them by the Holy Spirit – placing Christ's mark on them, and we will welcome them into the household of faith. That's why we do it. Not so that we can guarantee their entry into heaven – Christ showed us that that part was taken care of when He emerged from the tomb. No, this is about outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace.

Jesus Christ died on the cross, lay in a tomb for three days and was then resurrected and emerged from that tomb, reborn by the grace of God. It is that same gracious God – who loved us enough to send the only begotten Son to His death for our sins, that we celebrate here tonight. Tonight, as you join in reaffirming your faith in the words of your baptismal vows, don't just read the words. Let them sink into your consciousness. Take to heart what you are promising God on your behalf, and on behalf of Brandt and Easton.

In this Easter season, for ourselves and on behalf of the two beautiful boys whose lives have just begun, let's *really* commit ourselves to resisting evil (including the evil of talking about each other as if we were less than human); to repenting and returning to the Lord (every Sunday); to proclaiming by word *and example* the Good News of God in Christ; to serving Christ in all people (especially those we don't like to see because they're dirty or smelly); to loving our neighbors as ourselves (even if we know our neighbors don't *deserve* our love); and to striving for justice and peace among *all* people (including Iraqis, Afghanis, North Koreans, Venezuelans and Cubans); and respecting the *dignity* of *every* human being, (including Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, and Pastors Ted Haggard, Rod Parsley, John Hagee and Jeremiah Wright). If we can do those things, we won't have to worry about Easton and Brandt gaining entry into heaven, we will create heaven for them – right here in Texas – where God always intended heaven to be. Amen.