



When I was a camp counselor and we had enough Confirmation students for the week, we would always end our time together with what was called a Passion play. So, we would have the junior high youth walk to different spots around the camp as they watched portions of Jesus' story acted out in front of them. That meant all of us 20-somethings had to divvy up the parts: someone had to play Bartimaeus, who needed to appear blind before dirt was rubbed on his face. Someone needed to take on Thomas, who would say, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Perhaps a well-suited foreshadowing not just for the youth traversing through acres of woodlands, but into the rugged terrain of teenage life soon enough. Then, someone had to fill the role of Pontius Pilate, wiping his hands clean on the lodge steps before Jesus and the rest of the campers made the trek to the hillside.

But, for the very beginning of it all, they asked me to be the voice of God. Evidently, I had the lowest vocal range voice amongst us young adults at the time. And even though enough of us have gradually moved on from the idea of God having the white beard with the big booming voice pulsating from the heavens, there are still enough of us who, at least, have this subconscious emotional pull to that image, so we still go along with it in makeshift Passion plays and the like. With that, they had me go up amidst the trees while Jesus and the rest settled in by a creek below for our makeshift divine baptism of sorts, and I shouted as if I was attempting to make it seem like it was coming from heaven itself: "This is my Son, the Beloved. I am pleased with him!"

All well and good, but looking back to those summer weeks in our most humble attempt at youth ministry, I almost wish we would have paused our dramatic proceedings to go completely off-script for a bit. I wish someone would have stopped the young people in their tracks and tell them, proclaim to them, "By the way, in case you haven't gotten anything out of this week. In case you don't get much out of Confirmation or from the church as a whole, know this: what you just heard isn't just something that happened two thousand years ago. It isn't what's spoken from a far-off distant heaven. It applies directly to you, too. That voice comes from the very depths of your heart every day. God says to you, 'You are my child. You are beloved beyond anything a camp counselor or pastor can teach you. God is more than well pleased with you, no matter what. And the story you're about to watch all over this place is to show you just how much your Lord thoroughly loves you to your core.'" I wish we would have stopped everything for a moment to hit that Gospel reality home to them, but we didn't. We just went on with the normal operating procedure and hoped that the story could still hit those most precious children of God.

We didn't exactly keep track of them afterwards besides a few here and there who would return for future summer weeks or maybe some random run-in conversations down the line. But we can rest assured that those young people went through some rather...interesting terrain in their teenage years and beyond with expectations of 4.0 GPAs and 36 ACT scores and full pages of extra-curricular activities and community service clubs, all before needing to land the perfect job for themselves and families and anyone else they met along the way. The pressure can feel so immense for many of them. So, I wish we could just stop them in their tracks at times. I wish we sometimes go completely off-script for the traditional church operation and reassure them that

even if they don't always get what the church is trying to do, know this: God says to you, "You are my child. You are beloved beyond anything anyone can teach you. God is more than well pleased with you, no matter what."

I suppose we all have parts to play in this life-long production on earth. That whether we're basses or tenors or altos or sopranos or we don't know what any of that means or we can't carry a musical note to save our mortal lives, we still have a needed voice to proclaim with others. We still have opportunities on walking trails and hillsides and sanctuaries and classrooms to reassure children of God of all ages of the undisputable unconditional grace of God. And the story we're about to hear these next 40 days and beyond is to show us just how far that love of God will go that not even sin and death stand a chance against. If it doesn't always hit, know that the words proclaimed two thousand years ago still apply today, not just from the heavens, but from within you each and every day, "You are God's child. You are beloved to you core, no matter what." For that Great News not just for this Lent, but for all our days, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!