

# GET THE PICTURE?

## Sermon, January 8, 2017

### Baptism of the Lord Sunday

#### Text: Matthew 3:15-17

*"Get the picture?"* As we know, that is usually an idiom for, *"Do you understand the situation?"* It comes from the idea that when you "see" something, as opposed to just reading and/or hearing about it, you will understand things so much more clearly. After all, a picture is worth a thousand words, isn't it? So when you "see" something, then you'll get it, right? Well, don't be so sure. Even a thousand words, however well intentioned, may not always lead to clear understanding.

On September 29, 2000, riots and violence and riots erupted in Jerusalem, allegedly triggered by then-Likud Israeli party leader Ariel Sharon visiting the Temple Mount. I know Middle East politics can cause even the most attentive minds to glaze over, but let me attempt a brief summary: <sup>1</sup>

The Temple Mount is holy to both Muslims and Jews; it is a rectangular platform covering 35 acres of Jerusalem and is revered by Jews as the place where God gathered the dust to create Adam and where Abraham almost sacrificed his son Isaac. In about 1000 B.C., Solomon built the First Temple there. That structure was destroyed by the Babylonians; the Second Temple was built in 516 B.C. in Haggai's time and massively renovated over an eighty-plus year period by Herod 19 BC through 63 AD, then totally destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. ... we've talked about these in recent months. In 637 A.D., when the Arabs took Jerusalem, they built the Dome of the Rock, the gold-domed structure that is Jerusalem's most recognizable monument, on that Temple site. It is the third holiest place in Islam, after Mecca and Medina. It is believed by Islam to be where Mohammed rose to heaven. After the 1967 conflict, it was agreed Jews would be allowed to enter the site as tourists, but could not pray there. It has been and continues to be a source of great friction.

On September 30, 2000, the day after the riots erupted, the **Boston Globe** and the **New York Times** ran a picture on the front page that seemed to capture it all ... the picture showed an angry-looking, baton-wielding Israeli officer standing right in back of a young man who was bleeding profusely and in obviously painful agony. The caption under the picture read, *"An Israeli policeman and a wounded Palestinian yesterday."* You know, the past couple of years we've been seeing many pictures of policemen wielding weapons and lots of assumptions have been made, leading to riots in the streets of our cities ... hopefully, we've learned by now to not be so sure we "get the picture."

Like many Jews worldwide, Dr. Aaron Grossman of Chicago was following the escalating violence in Jerusalem with great concern. The October 6, 2000 edition of the **Wall Street Journal** reported that Dr. Grossman was all the more concerned and alarmed when he saw the "wounded Palestinian" in that Sept. 30 **New York Times/Boston Globe** newspaper picture. He knew immediately that was no wounded Palestinian; that wounded, bleeding young man pictured in obvious pain and backed by this angry-looking, baton-wielding Israeli officer was Dr. Grossman's son, Tuvia! Imagine Dr. Grossman's surprise and indignation when he read the caption: *"An Israeli policeman and a wounded Palestinian yesterday."* According to Dr. Grossman and other relatives, Tuvia and two friends were going about their ordinary business, but were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Tuvia was pulled from a taxi in Jerusalem by a mob of Palestinian Arabs, beaten and stabbed, and that officer intervened and was *protecting* Tuvia from further harm; he was directing his baton-wielding wrath at those who were threatening more harm on the innocent and vulnerable young man at his feet.

That angry-looking, baton-wielding Israeli officer was trying to **save** someone, not beat someone up. His anger was directed toward those who attacked this innocent, injured young man; his outrage was directed toward those who continued to threaten this one who was going about his ordinary business but now lay injured and broken and in mortal danger. It changes the whole meaning of the picture, doesn't it? Again, this Israeli officer was trying to protect a life, not attack one. Was he angry? Yes! But the baton of this noble officer was wielded in loving protection. The **Boston Globe** and the **New York Times** ran a correction a few days later, blaming it on the Associated Press. Mistakes happen. But what a mistake! Let's get the picture right!

It's not a perfect analogy, but so many people "see" a picture of God portrayed in the pages of Scripture as an oppressive, judgment-wielding Heavenly Cop who is determined to impose His version of justice on the world. They see the wrathful God pictured in the Bible as One Who is out to "get" all those rebels who don't measure up to His standards. But no! God is wielding His baton of wrath and judgment in protection of those He loves and this world He loves, this world He loves so much that He sent His only begotten Son. His anger is directed against

<sup>1</sup> This summary was summarized largely from this excellent summary/article: <http://theweek.com/articles/588465/struggle-over-temple-mount>

those forces and things which would injure and harm and disrupt and threaten the ordinary lives of His children. God hates the sin that ravages our lives, and He wields his baton of wrath and judgment against it ... because, like that Israeli policeman, He wants to protect, He wants to prevent further harm and to preserve peace and order to help us better enjoy this God-given gift of life. Let's get the picture right! He is our Father Who wants to protect and nurture and guard, to do all He can to enable us to enjoy life to the full. He wants to do all He can to make things *right*. He wants to "... fulfill all righteousness," which is just another way of saying He wants to see what is right and good *restored* and He wants the life-giving and life-enhancing right and good to prevail as the glorious norm!

In the verses leading up to our Gospel text today, John the Baptist seemed a bit confused the day Jesus showed up in the wilderness asking to be baptized. Wasn't Jesus supposed to be the judge who, as John warned, would blow fire down from the skies and wield His baton against those who weren't living right? But as John would go on to learn, instead of giving fire, God came to give Himself in the person of His Son. John says, in so many words, "*Jesus, what are you doing here? I should be baptized by you!*" Jesus responded to John's objections by saying that His baptism was necessary "*to fulfill all righteousness.*" Again, "*to fulfill all righteousness*" can be simplified to mean, "*to make things right.*" In other words, this is the only way we will be made right and good ... the wonder and the mystery is that God in the flesh identified with flawed humans in order to make things right. He entered into His Creation in order to redeem it, not to punish it ... He did so in order to show us the ordinary Way, the simple Truth and the routine yet gloriously abundant life. Let's get the picture right!

There is so much that could be said about Jesus' reply, but for now I'll just point out that Jesus is not coming to this baptism to have His past washed away; He is the one human being who ever existed who has no sinful past. Rather, He is stepping up to embrace His future and accept His calling. He is accepting His *commission*. His calling, His commission, is, to put it simply, to do what it takes to make things right. As He is baptized, His identity is vocally affirmed by God from heaven ("*THIS IS MY SON, in Whom I am pleased*"), He accepts His calling and equipping as God's Son, and He publicly (*and willingly*) commences His public ministry, His public service, which in three short years will result in His brutal death ... because it was only through His atoning death that things would *ultimately* be made right and good. Now, Christian baptism is about having our sins washed away, but it's also about having our identity affirmed as God's sons and daughters, it's about stepping into the future to embrace our calling, our commission, as God's sons and daughters and all that identity entails. We are called to be coworkers with our Lord in doing what we can to make things right, in doing what is right and good, in following His lordship, and in infant baptism we seek to do that right from the get-go ... we want to raise our children to grow up as God's sons and daughters, serving Him in all they do, doing what it right and good and honorable and holy.

I like the old story about Henry Ford II, grandson of Henry Ford. (*Edsel Ford was the only child of Clara and Henry Ford and the namesake of that ill-fated automobile; Edsel named his son Henry Ford II; that's why it's not Henry Ford, Jr.*) Henry Ford II became president of Ford Motor Company in Detroit in the forties following his discharge from the Navy after World War II. There was a machinist with the Ford company in Detroit who had, over a period of years, "borrowed" (*stolen, actually*) various parts and tools from the company which he had not bothered to return. While this practice was not condoned, it was more or less accepted as a necessary business expense by management, for nothing really could be done about employee theft in the days before metal detectors and security tags. The machinist, however, experienced a dramatic Christian conversion. He became a devout believer and was baptized. He took his baptism seriously, and embraced his calling to do what he could to set things right. In short, he got the picture. The very next Monday morning, the day after his Sunday baptism, he arrived at work loaded down with all the tools and all the parts he had "borrowed" from the company over the years. He explained the situation to his foreman, added that he'd never really meant to steal them or hurt the company, and expressed his profound sorrow for what he had done. He apologized and hoped he'd be forgiven and said he really wanted to make things right. The foreman was so astonished and impressed by this man's action that he cabled Mr. Ford himself, who was visiting a plant in Europe at the time, and explained the entire event in detail.

Immediately, Henry Ford II telegraphed back: "*Dam up the Detroit River, and baptize the entire city!*"

I like that. Can you imagine a world where the whole city or the whole country was baptized and everyone lived out his or her baptism? Can you imagine a whole *church* where everyone determined each and every moment to live out their baptisms and determine to follow Jesus Christ and do what they could to make things right, to do what is right and good and honorable and holy no matter the cost? What a difference that would make. How far would that go toward "fulfilling all righteousness," toward making things right and good and better? If that were to happen, then this petition of the Lord's Prayer we pray each week might be more speedily answered: "*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*"

Get the picture?