

The Baptism of Jesus

We heard about John the Baptist last month during Advent. John was quite a character, clothed in camel's hair, with a strange diet of locusts and honey, living out in the wilderness, beyond the Jordan River. John was the voice of one crying out in the wilderness calling people to repent, be baptized, and prepare the way for the coming Messiah. His message was so powerful and compelling that crowds from Jerusalem and the whole region came out to see and listen to him. People embraced his message of repentance. They confessed their weaknesses, they desired a new life with God, and they gave themselves to be baptized by John.

In the days that John was baptizing, Jesus came up from the town of Nazareth from the region of Galilee. This was no small distance for Jesus to travel; it was between 60 to 70 miles and would have taken several days. Yet he journeys out to the Jordan so he can see and hear for himself this prophet named John. Although Jesus was without sin, he understood John's message, and he gave himself to be baptized by John. In this act of baptism, Jesus was offering himself to God, and to God's will and purpose for his life. Jesus, throughout his life and in his teachings, shows us the path we are to follow. That is true in his baptism. Baptism is the way we can give ourselves to God. It is the way for those who desire a closer walk with God.

Mark writes that just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart – the heavens actually torn apart – and the Spirit of God descending on Jesus like a dove. Then, a voice, the very voice of God, comes from the heavens and declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well-pleased."

Every year, on the first Sunday following the Epiphany, January 6th, we hear this same story; we commemorate this event – the baptism of Jesus. As we do, we are called to reflect on the meaning of our own baptism. We are asked to consider our own journey that calls us to repentance, and forgiveness, and new life.

For Jesus, his baptism was a beginning. It signified that from that point his life was to be solely dedicated to the ministry for which he had been born. Jesus' ministry was the salvation of the world, to be God's light and love for the world. As Christians, we take our part in that same ministry, and we look to our own baptism to see what

God is saying to us. On this Sunday of the Church year, the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ, we look to Jesus' baptism, and we will renew our own Baptismal Vows today.

In the rite of baptism, first, we are called to repentance. The candidates for baptism are asked three questions: do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God... do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God... and do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God. After this call to repentance the next three questions invite us to turn our lives to God and join with Jesus. We are asked, "Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior? Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love? Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?" And to all these questions, the persons being baptized answer, "I do."

Decades ago, private baptisms were common in the Episcopal Church. Families would gather with the priest on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon in a small, rather brief ceremony, and that was it. But since the 1979 prayerbook, this important liturgy has been included to take place within the Sunday worship. There is good reason why the entire community joins in and participates in a baptism. Everyone present joins in affirming the baptismal covenant. When Jesus was baptized, he was saying, "I do," to God's purpose for him. When we say, "I do," to God in our baptisms, we join with Jesus. We are saying, "yes" to God's purpose for us. The final promises we make in the Baptismal Covenant beautifully articulate our role in working with Jesus in bringing love and salvation to the world. We will do our part in building the kingdom of God. We make the promise, with God's help, to continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. We vow to repent and return to the Lord whenever we sin. We vow to proclaim the Good News of God in our words and deeds. We promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and strive for justice and peace among all people.

And there is another point that this story of our Lord's baptism teaches us. The heavens opened and God declared to Jesus, "You are my son, my beloved, with you I am well-pleased." But it is worth noting that God declares this to Jesus before, in fact, Jesus had done anything at all. Read the first chapter of Mark's gospel, or the early chapters in the gospels of Matthew, Luke, or John. Prior to his baptism, we don't read about Jesus healing a single person, or working one miracle, or preaching one powerful sermon. At that point in his life, Jesus had no followers. I mean this as no criticism of Jesus, but according to the scriptures, before his baptism, he hadn't

done any of those things that marked his later ministry. And yet, God the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, tears open the heavens and says, “with you I am well pleased.”

What a great reminder for us. We tend to believe that God must love us because of the good things we do. We in the church might think that God loves us because we are working hard to become good people, because we come to church on Sundays, because we are trying to do the right thing.

So much of our society reinforces this. We admire the businesswomen and men who work the hardest and achieve the most. The American way would tell us that life ought to be about winning, and gaining, and attaining more and more. This path even finds its way into religion. Protestants, Roman Catholics, members of the big church in town, the Mormons, and yes, we Episcopalians – we fall into the temptation that how things work in the world are the ways of God. Achieving, winning, proving our righteousness, working our way into God’s favor, securing the highest level of heaven, earning our worthiness in God’s eyes. That is not the way of God. That is not the Gospel. That is not grace.

The words to Jesus at his baptism proclaim that God loved Jesus already. And the word to us in our baptism proclaim that God loves us before we were baptized, before became disciples, before we ever entered a church, before we worked so hard at being righteous. Jesus’ story, and our story, tell us just how loving and forgiving our God is. This is the God we worship, one who knows us fully, and loves us fully, and calls us. The love of God, there from the start, is the very foundation of what we call the gospel, the good news. It is called grace, and God gives us grace not because of our work, or achieving, or our doing anything. God give us grace because God loves us.

I believe that Jesus was able to live the life he did because he knew, with his whole heart, that he was that loved by God. He knew himself to be God’s own child, God’s beloved. And trusting in this love, he was able to realize that God loves everyone that much, because they are all God’s beloved children. And Jesus gave his life offering God’s love to the whole world.

Baptism tells us who God is and who we are in the eyes and in the heart of God. Baptism declares the powerful, shining truth of who we truly are, and our task is to spend the rest of our lives understanding that and living into that reality. Like Jesus, what baptism says about us is meant to enliven us in our prayer and in our work. We are to minister to others as we understand that they too are God's children, loved and forgiven.

Let the message of baptism work in us and through us, and bubble up from within us, as the Holy Spirit moves and inspires our lives. We are loved and forgiven by God. With you, God is well pleased. May we be empowered by the Spirit to become more and more the people God has created us to be. May we join Jesus in our work and prayer and in building the kingdom of God. Amen.

Trace Browning

Proper 24, 19th Sunday after Pentecost – Year C

Genesis 1:1-5 • Psalm 29 • Acts 19:1-7 • Mark 1:4-11

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