

Epiphany 1, Yr A, 010911
All Saints
The Rev'd Mary Robert

Can you remember your baptism? If you were baptized as an infant, your only memories may be pictures you've seen or stories that were told to you when you were older. I was 2 months old when I was baptized, so I don't remember anything about the actual event. But if you were a child, or even an adult, you may have lots of memories of the time when you were baptized. I was baptized by Bishop Girault Jones of Louisiana, who scooped water out of the font with a shell and poured it on my head. You might have been immersed in a baptistery in your church, or you might even have been 'dunked' in a lake or a river. A couple I knew in seminary had a baby who was baptized at All Saints Chapel in Sewanee; instead of using the font, they put a plastic baby bathtub on the altar, and when it was time, removed her diaper and plunged her little naked body into the water right there in front of God and everybody! (It was the '70s, you know!)

But no matter how or when or where or by whom you were baptized, the result was the same: you were named as a child of God, beloved of God.

So...why are we talking about baptism today? Christmas was only 2 weeks ago; for a few days we read about shepherds and angels and the baby Jesus and how Joseph took Mary and the baby to Egypt. In case you missed it, this past Thursday we celebrated the Epiphany, the time when the Magi came from a far country to worship Jesus. Now, just 3 days later, Jesus is a grown man who comes to John the Baptist to be baptized himself. Moving 30 years in two weeks seems like too much fast-forwarding in the DVD player!

The season of Epiphany is the season of light - of light that cannot be overcome by darkness - of the light of Christ and today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany, the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord. It is an epiphany moment - revealing God in the flesh and blood of God's son, Jesus.

The Gospels are full of such moments of epiphany where God becomes manifest in our midst, and we will read about more of them during this Epiphany season. In today's reading, Jesus came to the Jordan, asking a hesitant John to baptize him. Coming up out of the waters, "suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'" In this instant heaven and earth were brought together, and Christ was revealed as the light of the world before our very eyes.

Lane Denson, a priest in Nashville and an old friend, writes that of all the images of Jesus that we have adopted throughout time - the all-divine Jesus whose feet never quite touched the ground, the all-human one who is our best friend, the friendly hippie/rock star of the Jesus movement, and on and on - this image of Jesus at his baptism is the image as God intends it. "Jesus is what God means not only for the fulfillment of human being but by the very being and becoming a human." It is the image as God intends it, in which we share in our own creation and in which we are given the same freedom that Jesus is given - freedom to accept God's call to be "the church, the Body of Christ in the world. To wrestle with it in our own wilderness. To question it in our own garden of Gethsemane. Or, of course, to ignore it altogether." (Denson)

You've heard it here before. We preach about our call using the words of the Baptismal Covenant. Listen to them again, particularly the verbs: Continue in what the apostles did. Persevere in resisting evil, and when we fail, return to the Lord. Proclaim the Good News in both word and example. Seek and serve Christ in all persons. Strive for justice and peace. What does it mean to be a Christian in any place or time? The answer is in the Covenant.

Note that it is not a Baptismal Contract that we have made. It is a covenant. A contract is about the law; it is entered into by the parties with clear and equal understanding and agreement about terms or conditions, results, and consequences; it implies not only cooperation, but compromise. If a contract is broken by either party or if it is abolished, it is no longer valid.

A covenant, on the other hand, "is by grace initiated by one with others and even if broken, yet endures. A broken contract ends. A broken covenant lives on and by grace can be renewed. Our Baptismal Covenant is a relationship initiated by God, to which we -- a body of people -- respond in faith. Once made, it is eternal, broken or not, and may always be healed and restored by forgiveness, reconciliation, and return. And the great and redeeming joy is that in such healing of our brokenness there is present the kingdom of God."

The church is founded on that covenant with God. "It is founded on a promise not to make life easier or more orthodox...but to make life more purposeful, more meaningful, not for self-serving, but for serving selves. When we are baptized, we say "Yes" to that covenant." (Denson)

Our Baptismal Covenant calls us to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves. Whenever it was that we "came up from the water" of our own

baptism - be it decades ago or just months ago - we came up from the waters changed forever, new persons in Christ, children of God called to take on as our own the mission of Jesus; we promise to invest our lives - body, mind and spirit - and any resources and gifts we have to offer - in the mission of ordering the world, as well as ourselves, in harmony with the reign of God - that is, making the world what it should be when God's reign is fulfilled.

And so we answer our call by venturing out to find those on the margins, as Christ did. We look for our neighbors in order to serve them, particularly the poor and the weak, the widowed and orphaned; for those not important enough to be heard or seen in the council rooms of the powerful; for those who cannot afford "a million dollar defense team" to represent them in the courts; for the socially and economically disadvantaged and the politically disenfranchised. Instead of gold, frankincense and myrrh, we must bring the gift of ourselves to those who are in need - the vulnerable and defenseless.

But wait, there's more!

Besides us being forever changed by Jesus, Jesus was changed by the waters of the Jordan. The Christ was changed by John's cleansing, and ever since we worship a baptized God. What does that mean? For one, it means that God knows thoroughly the suffering involved in being a humble servant who is working to bring in a kingdom that hasn't been accomplished yet. But the most important thing is that Jesus' immersion into the mucky waters of the Jordan means that Christ will never ask us to go somewhere that he is not. When we know that God has been washed by the waters of baptism, we also know that we are not called to fight the demons of this world alone.

So whenever we see someone dripping at the font, (as we will shortly), let us remember Jesus at his baptism, who chose with the freedom given to him by God, to join us in this earth and offer himself as savior of all. And let us also remember our own baptisms and carry out with all the energy we can muster the mission to which we have been called. AMEN.