

7 January 2024, 1 Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Genesis 1:1-5

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

Psalm 29

Baptism: Adoption, Mission, Community

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Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. Amen.

Raise your hand if you remember your baptism. Raise your hand if, when you were baptized or at some point afterward, you ever developed an understanding of what baptism is about? We probably don't do a very good job in the Church, whether in the Episcopal Church or another denomination, of reflecting on, talking about, and really digging into baptism and its meaning.

I can't claim I had any deep understanding of baptism when I was baptized. I was baptized in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. And I was nine years old. So, I remember my baptism. I remember the Rev. S. Frank Emmanuel standing over me scooping water over my head – and patting my head maybe a bit too aggressively – as he said in that Southern black pastor voice: "I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

What's more, I remember wanting to be baptized. This wasn't a decision my mother made for me. I was in on this. A spiritual director once wondered with me whether this desire for baptism wasn't me feeling called to the sacraments. There is something to that.

Now, let me be clear. I'm not saying this as some sort of "look how holy I am statement." It's actually the fact that I couldn't really tell you at the time what baptism was about or why I wanted to be baptized. I can only think that this desire to be baptized was a prompting of the Holy Spirit and not something

that came from within me. I think of the story of Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah as told in Matthew, when Jesus says, "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven." Like Peter, I kind of stumbled on to the rightness of getting baptized.

I have sympathy for the Ephesians in our reading from Acts today. When Paul meets our Ephesian siblings, they have been baptized into the baptism John the Baptizer taught about. They have not been baptized in Jesus' Name, and they have not received the Holy Spirit. In fact, the existence of the Holy Spirit is news to them.

Our Ephesian friends were like Peter with his confession and me with my baptism. We all seemed to stumble on the right answer. The Ephesians were followers of Jesus. Peter proclaims Jesus as Messiah. I chose baptism. But it was stumbling on the right answer. The Ephesians haven't received the Holy Spirit and don't seem to have received all of Jesus' teaching. Peter's confession doesn't come from his reason or knowledge or his experience of Jesus. And I didn't really know what baptism was about or why I wanted it.

So, let's talk about baptism. As we reflect on Scripture and Jesus' baptism, there are three things that come to the fore about our own baptism.

In Jesus, baptism joins heaven and earth. It restores and reaffirms the relationship of goodness and love God intended when God created us.

All four gospels reference Jesus' baptism. Matthew and Luke tell a similar but longer version of what we read in Mark today. John doesn't give us the story of Jesus' baptism, but what John says leads us to the conclusion that John the Baptizer baptized Jesus.

All four gospels say the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove. Matthew, Mark, and Luke include a voice from heaven. In Mark and Luke, the voice speaks to Jesus: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." In Matthew, the voice speaks to all present: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Taking these Scripture passages together, I think we can safely conclude that, at Jesus' baptism and at our own, heaven and earth are joined. The four gospels and Acts talk about the Holy Spirit coming at baptism: God comes from heaven to us. And there is real substance to this. The gospels have the Holy Spirit descending like a dove. It may not have been a literal dove, but

the sense is that this is more than an ethereal event. There's something material happening here.

Then the voice. The voice comes from heaven to earth. In Mark, the heavens are even torn apart. But wait. There's more. The voice of God says that Jesus is God's Son, the Beloved and that God is well pleased. This is more than just a thumbs up to Jesus being baptized. God is unmistakably claiming Jesus, and, when we are baptized, God claims us. Divinity and humanity are brought together. God adopts humanity into God's family, and God is well pleased. I hear echoes of Genesis 1. God makes us in God's image and declares humanity and everything else God creates good. Baptism recreates us, joining us to God and God to us and restoring the goodness God always planned for us.

In Jesus, we are also baptized into God's mission. You've heard me say many times that our mission is God's mission, and that God is always inviting us into that mission. Let's look at Scripture. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, right after Jesus is baptized, the Holy Spirit drives him into the wilderness where he is tested. After descending on him, the Holy Spirit sends Jesus. You may remember from a prior sermon that the word "mission" comes from a Latin word that means "to send." Immediately after baptism, the Holy Spirit sends Jesus. Baptism leads to Jesus' mission, his sending.

After this sermon, we will renew our Baptismal Covenant together. A covenant is a solemn contract, so just by its name you know we take this seriously. Have you ever reflected on the promises contained in our Baptismal Covenant? We promise to be in community with one another, to pray, to resist evil, to repent when we hurt God or each other, to speak and live the gospel, to look for Christ in everyone, to love everyone, to clamor for justice, to be agents of peace, to respect every human being, and to cherish and protect the gift of creation. If you think about the enormity of those promises, that's quite the tall order. Everything we promise to do is difficult! In a sense, our baptismal promises lead us, with Jesus, to be tested in the desert.

Even so, in baptism, Jesus commits himself to God's mission and, similarly, we commit ourselves to God's mission of love and reconciliation. To be sure, we face challenges, temptations, and tests as we try to live into our solemn baptismal promises. Jesus faced tests too, and God helped him. There is a reason that the answer we give to these hard-to-do baptismal promises is "I

will, with God's help." Baptism means saying "Yes" to God's mission in prayerful expectation and faith that God will help us.

But there is something else that helps us live into our baptismal promises. In Jesus, we are baptized into community, united and empowered by the Holy Spirit. When Jesus is baptized, there are other people around. Now, I don't know if they saw baptism as binding them together in a community, but in all four gospels, John the Baptizer makes an announcement to the crowd about who Jesus is. Whether they know it or not, whether they like it or not, they are joined in the knowledge that Jesus is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. They are joined by the Holy Spirit.

Likewise, in Acts, the Ephesians are not individualized. They are a community. Paul talks to them as a community, they respond as a community, they are baptized as a community, they receive the Holy Spirit as a community, and they exhibit the fruits of the Spirit as a community. Again, the Holy Spirit binds them together.

In our baptismal liturgy, the whole congregation, representing the communion of saints, promises to support those who are baptized. Then, we welcome them into the "household of God" and commission them to "[c]onfess the faith of Christ crucified, proclaim his resurrection, and share with us in his eternal priesthood."

Baptism binds us in community, and it's in community that we live out our baptismal promises and participate in God's mission. Just look at this parish. Sunday worship, Compline, Sermon Group, EfM, Fellowship Group, Antiracism Ministry, participating in feeding ministries, providing space for community organizations, welcoming all people, and much more. This is us living into our baptismal promises together in community.

Yes, our baptismal promises demand much of us, but they don't demand that we do it alone. We do it with God's help and with each other. We do it together. As I reflect on my own baptism and consider our Baptismal Covenant, as I see baptism join heaven and earth, as I hear baptism call us into God's mission, and as I feel baptism bind us together, I am in awe. I can only think of one response: "I want that!"

Beloved siblings, baptism is transformative. You aren't the same afterward. Baptism joins heaven and earth and makes us part of God's family. Baptism calls us into God's mission and requires of us a commitment to some difficult

tasks. But Baptism is not a solo sport. Baptism unites us as one family as it adopts us into God's family. Baptism joins us as a community. And it's in that community, with God's help, that we can live into our baptismal promises and change the world.

Amen.