

January 7, 2018

The Baptism of Jesus

PRAYER

May the words of my mouth be meditations of our hearts and be always acceptable unto Thee. O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

AMEN

SERMON

Usually after the celebration of Christmas, we have two Sundays before Epiphany arrives. It just depends on what day of the week Christmas arrives. So, this is a little unusual that we jump directly after the first Sunday of Christmas to Epiphany. Epiphany was yesterday, and the Sunday after Epiphany is always the proper's that you just heard. Not always the same gospel reading but always about the baptism of Jesus. It is one of the stories of Jesus' life that is in all of the gospels. The gospel according to Mark actually begins with the baptism of Jesus. We don't hear anything about the birth. We don't hear anything about his young life. We begin the gospel according to Mark, the oldest gospel, with this baptism that Jesus received from John. And Mark's understanding of who John is and what his baptism is about.

Baptism has always been a very important part of who we are as Christ's followers. And one of the questions that I am asked most frequently in the time that I have been ordained is what exactly goes on in baptism. Because they read the story of the baptism of Jesus by John. And then they question, what is our baptism? What is my baptism? What does it really do? What am I supposed to feel? How am I supposed to live out this baptism? If this is different. And it is different.

The baptism of John just as the gospel according to Mark explains was the baptism of repentance. The baptism that was not uncommon in

Judaism at the time. It was about repentance of sin. It was a living out. It was confessing one's sins where one has not lived up to the covenant with God. And asking for forgiveness and the intention of being washed clean and beginning anew.

And one would normally do this ritual by confessing one's sins, stepping into the water, whatever was holding that, then would step out on the other side. It was turning away from sin and turning towards God anew. It's quite a beautiful ritual quite frankly. The baptism that John was doing in the river was basically the same only with the addition that this was in preparation. This is preparing those who came, who heard this voice crying out in the wilderness. Prepare a way for the Lord to be ready to see and receive and understand the Christ, the Messiah that had been so long looked for by the people of Israel.

And this was an act of preparation to confess, to repent from the path that they were traveling to be prepared to travel along and follow the Christ who was coming into the world. And so, this was a slightly different baptism than what they have lived before. And with Jesus coming to John and being baptized. We begin to get a sense of what the baptism of Jesus will be about.

As the heavens open up, as the spirit of God descends upon Jesus in the sight of those who were present, certainly in the sight of John. To hear that voice, "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." So, we get this sense and we hear in the gospel according to Mark that this is the baptism that Jesus is going to bring for followers, for his followers. A baptism where the Holy Spirit descends upon those who will choose to follow. And will help lead them to become the citizens of the kingdom, the children of God that God is calling them to be through the experience of the Christ. His life, death, and resurrection.

We hear in the epistle this morning Paul in Ephesus, asking some of the disciples. Some people who are trying to follow this gospel that they have heard. Well have you received the Holy Spirit, and they don't even know exactly what's going on. I haven't even heard about the Holy Spirit, what is that about. And so, Paul explains to them that the experience of baptism to follow Jesus Christ is to receive the Holy Spirit.

And he baptizes them, or he prays over them, they have already received the baptism. He prays over them and they receive this part of the baptism of Christ's followers, of Christians where Christ descends upon them. And they have this immediate reaction, they speak in tongues, all these things are going on.

And people today read that kind of experience and they say, "That is not what I had. I was baptized, I don't even remember my baptism. I'm assuming that it was a duly-ordained minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ, that if the spirit of God descended upon me I have no recollection of it. It didn't make me feel any different." And for those who are old enough to remember their baptism, there are not many Episcopalians who were born into the Episcopal church that remember their actual baptism.

We have a confirmation where we try to explain what actually took place. The idea and the understanding that in baptism God acted whether you realize it or not. God acted because your parents and the church members and godparents if you had them, made promises that you would grow to learn about Jesus, to know about God, and God's experience in your life. And to make a difference in who you are and the identity you have as you are raised from those earliest days of life through adulthood into old age. And finally entering into the fullness of God's kingdom.

Baptism is a beginning of an understanding that God chooses to be a part of the lives of his creation. Just as he choose to live that life in the person of Jesus. What we just celebrated in the reincarnation, in the birth of Jesus, where God and humanity came together. That is reflected in the life of those who are baptized. Where God chooses to be a part of our life. But the other side of that is that we choose to allow God to be a part of our lives. In how we see the world, in how we live our lives in relationship not only to God but to one another.

And we try to as children grow up, children who have been baptized. We try children of the church, as parents, as Christians to help them to see, and know, and understand that even though they did not have or not likely to have that experience that Paul come through Ephesus had this great radical experience of the Spirit entering into their lives. And giving them special gifts, speaking in tongues, and others.

Most of us never experience that and yet the promise of God is that I am part of your life. The Holy Spirit is part of your life, in the living of your life. And how you see the world, how you see your life, how you see one another. It is that part of God that enters and remains with us, that enables us to see the world a little closer to the way that God sees the world. It is that part of our lives where even when we seem alienated from the people around us that we are not alone.

That God chooses and promises to be with us as we go through this life. And no matter what is going on, whether it be celebration, whether it be difficult times. We are not facing that alone. And not facing that only with the human gifts and talents have and try to build up in our lives. It is God with us to help us see, to know, to understand. It is about being intentional. About learning about God through the scriptures. Through studies, through worship, through sermons sometimes.

It is about learning what it is that God has for us, wants for us, is doing in us, and with us, and for us. Because that is what baptism is really about. It is about the promise that God will be with us to make us his beloved son or daughter.

So that we live life not in fear or not in questioning but boldly going forth and proclaiming a God who created this world as good, as the people as good, as all things as good and very good. And to know that God sees you as good and very good. Even in the times when we don't always live up to what God wants from us. God's promise is not to leave us comfortless but to give the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And it is in that baptism. That initiation into God's kingdom, that initiation into this thing, this community that we call the church. But it for us also to strive to live that out in our lives. To come to know God more and more as we grow, as we mature. It is not about not following the law, but it is about having a whole new understanding of the law as God gave it to his people, his chosen, so that we might live that out.

So that those ten commandments that began this covenant with God and the chosen people. It is not that we ignore that at all. But it is that we live into it to judge ourselves. Not as a judgement against the world and for other people but for ourselves. To live in love with God. To live in relationship with one another. To live out our lives in peace and humility as we hear Jesus begin to interpret the law and the understanding and relationship with God in the attitudes, in the sermon on the Mount.

These are all the things that we are called to do and are giving the strength and the courage and the ability to understand as the Holy Spirit is part of our lives. And so, it is not unusual that as we grow and mature, as we come closer in our relationship to God, as we understand that relationship with God more and more that we begin to see the

scriptures differently than we did when we were young. That we understand what it is to follow the law of God for ourselves differently as we grow older than we did when we were young. Just as young people mature and understand life and the living of life more and more as they age.

So, we as Christians even though we were baptized that is the beginning and we continue to grow and mature and understand ourselves as God's beloved children. As we deal with the difficulties of life, as we turn to God and know that he is there for us and with us and does not abandon us in the most difficult of times. And in the most joyful of times.

It is about inviting God daily to be a part of who we are, in the decisions that we are making. It is about seeing the world and seeing justice and mercy played out and demanding it for all people. Not just for ourselves. That is what baptism is about. It is about that beginning. It is about being called to be God's son or daughter. It's about living out in the world what we know, and hope, and pray for for ourselves. That we that for all people.

The baptism of Jesus was a unique event. And that we see played out the baptism for repentance and the call to be ready. And the giving of the Holy Spirit all played out in that one baptism. The baptism for you and for me is that new beginning, not because as infants we have sinned or have original sin, but because God has chosen us, wants us, loves us, cares for us. And wants us to be his children, wants us to know God intimately as Abba. And to live life with the security of God's presence, not as a bubble that protects us from the world but as a shield that helps us to walk through the world.