

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany – The Baptism of our Lord
January 12, 2020
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St. John's Episcopal Church

Text: Matthew 3:13-17

I preach in the name of the Creator, the Redeemer and the Giver of new life. Amen.

Wars and threats of war; a world that seems bent on collapsing into chaos and violence; people splitting into hostile groups; political tyrants using fear to motivate and control their followers; religious leaders aligning with political leaders, claiming God is on their side; the wealthy getting wealthier and the poor getting poorer; marginalized peoples seeking release from oppression and systemic violence...

While this may sound like a description of our country and the world today – and I think it is an accurate one – this was also the state of the world into which Jesus was born and raised and began his ministry. It was the state of the world when John was leading *his* ministry, baptizing followers in the Jordan River, calling for justice and repentance.

Into this tumultuous time and place Jesus wades into the water. For me, Jesus' *baptism* represents his entrance into the world, more so than his birth that we celebrate at Christmas. His baptism is his full immersion – literally and figuratively – into the human condition, into the messiness of the world we humans create and inhabit.

And it wasn't just any preacher or prophet he goes to for his baptism (there were plenty of others offering similar rites). Jesus goes to John, likely a pretty well-known figure in the area. John was probably recognizable not only for his odd appearance – remember, he goes around wearing some kind of camel's hair garment and eating locusts and wild honey – but also for his agitating – he was preaching repentance and justice and care for the poor.

In Luke's gospel we learn that when people came to John for baptism and asked what they needed to do, he told them that they needed to repent of their sins and live lives of generosity and selflessness. He told them that if they had two coats, they needed to give one to someone who had none; if they had food, they needed to share it with someone who had none; he told tax collectors and soldiers to collect only what was due them, and not to extort more with threats of violence. As you might guess, John's messages would have caused some consternation among the authorities. John was a disturber of the peace; he troubled the waters.

So, it is to this prophet and preacher and his community of followers that Jesus goes to be baptized. We don't know why, exactly, Jesus sought baptism – certainly not to

repent and receive forgiveness for sins. Perhaps he was seeking to align himself with those he had heard his mother speak of – the poor, the hungry, the oppressed – the communities of people he would engage with in his own ministry.

James Martin, the Jesuit priest and author contends that Jesus's baptism is, among other things, "an act of solidarity, a human act from the Son of God, who casts his lot with the people of the time."

His alignment with "the least of these," the people existing at the margins of society – not the religious or political or economic leaders – reveals the expansiveness of God's love, the connection of God to those who others would rather leave out. Jesus's baptism into this community troubles the waters for those who wished to maintain the status quo, to keep some people in and some people out and pit people against each other. No kings aligned themselves with *these* people. But Jesus did.

I think that Jesus's baptism also served as a public ritual intended to inaugurate his ministry and provide a glimpse into what God's kingdom on earth would like.

This act of humble submission makes clear that he would not be the king riding in ahead a great military, armed and ready to fight; rather, he presents himself to John, in the presence of John's community and asks John to baptize him.

Even John is surprised at his request for baptism. He says, "Hey, wait. I can't baptize you; you should be baptizing me." Jesus says no; *this* is as it should be. Imagine the surprise of the people, realizing that this is the man John has been telling them about, the Messiah, the one who is "greater than I" and whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. Instead of coming in and taking over and asking John and the others to submit themselves to his authority, he humbles *himself*, becomes one of them in this poignant act of submission.

As he is preparing to begin his public ministry, he literally immerses himself in a community; he aligns himself with the broken and beaten down, the ones who work every day just trying to stay afloat.

Into these tumultuous and frightening times, and into this community of people, he enters. This is where he starts. He wades into the water, is drenched in God's love and he is transformed.

This is where it begins for us too. In our baptism, we join Jesus in the water, are drenched in God's love for us, and we are transformed. But here's the thing, Jesus doesn't ask us to just follow him into the water – he asks us to follow him out into the world as well.

Our baptism is one of the most profound moments in our lives, whether we were infants when it happened or adults. We make commitments – or commitments are

made for us – to live in such a way that God’s love is made evident by our lives and our love for God and for our neighbor. Like Jesus, we are baptized with and into a community of believers. It’s not a private, personal endeavor but a public act during which the members of the community vow to love, support and encourage us.

In baptism we are reminded that we are children of God and we are beloved. We are soaked in God’s love for us, sealed as Christ’s own forever, and enveloped in a community that recommits itself with us to the work of the gospel.

Our work begins here at the font because, like Jesus and John, we live in tumultuous and troubling times where fear and discord abound. The waters of baptism should inspire us to action, to align ourselves with the oppressed and the hungry and marginalized and mistreated; to stand up for those who are dehumanized and demeaned by the leaders of this country.

We are called to emerge from these waters of baptism restored, renewed and ready to be the hands and feet and love of Jesus in the tumultuous world around us. It is easy to get discouraged, I know. It can feel overwhelming – how can I make a difference, how can I change what is happening in the world?

I will tell you that every act of love, mercy or compassion makes a difference beyond the single act itself and the person to which you offer it. Like the ripples in the water when you touch it, when you immerse yourself in it, it moves from you in infinite directions to places and people you will never know – but you will have touched them.

So start there. Start at the font. Start in community. Touch this water and remember your baptism. We can’t all do everything. We can’t work on every issue we see. We are all called to something, however. So start here. As you feel this water run through your fingers and you see the ripples in the water, open your heart to where God is calling you to work, who God is calling you to align yourself with, and then step into that water.

Remember your vows to proclaim the good news of God in Christ, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, and to strive for justice and peace among all people.

Immerse yourself in the waters of baptism and let them wash over and strengthen you. Let them remind you that you are beloved and that through Christ you can do infinitely more than you can possibly imagine. You can and do make a difference in the world. Thanks be to God. Amen.