

January 10, 2021 Baptism of Jesus – Journey into the Unknown

Last Sunday we celebrated Epiphany, the season before Lent that officially started this past Wednesday. We probably associate Epiphany mostly with the visitation of the Magi – those strangers from the East who recognized in a small child the makings of a king. Epiphany is all about seeing beyond what is obvious on the surface, and in recognizing a call to move from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

Really, Epiphany is about believing in the possibility of a change in fortune. Too often we limit our future based on what we've experienced in the past. If we've suffered physical pain for the past few decades we expect that it will continue. If we've had a series of heartbreaking relationships we expect the pattern to happen again and again. If we've been unsuccessful in achieving our dreams we decide that our dreams were unrealistic in the first place, and will never come true.

But Epiphany challenges us to see things differently. It reminds us that God is at work in the world, constantly opening up new paths to us, inviting us to dream in bigger and better ways. If only we will allow ourselves to believe, to dream, to trust in God's lovingkindness toward us, the truth will suddenly appear, like the light has been switched on. But the call of Epiphany doesn't happen in just one quick burst of light... it's a journey... it happens when Christmas ends... it's a new beginning... and as a popular secular song goes: Every new beginning comes

from some other beginning's end. We saw that this week in the news and events regarding the horrific uprising in the Capitol building in the US. Donald Trump's reign, and power, comes to an end with the beginning of Joe Biden's upcoming inauguration. Much agitation, but things must change, a new journey must take place, and hopefully there will be more peace and calm in the coming days, weeks, months. I pray that our friends, and even family, south of us, survive this tragic event and come out of it with new hope, new life, new epiphanies of how to move forward. It will require pastoral leadership, compassionate leadership, and graceful relinquishment of responsibilities. It shall be a new dawn, a new day. But in the meantime, we shall overcome, and our hearts ache.

However, there's nothing like beginnings. I find that so much of our talk in the church seems to focus on endings. Such talks occasion valid and important feelings that need to be offered space and energy. But have we forgotten what beginnings feel like? Have we been dying for so long that forget what birthing feels like? What fears, concerns, and worries do we have at beginnings? What expectations and anticipations and hopes? Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end. What of the Spirit's wisdom as we journey into the unknown?

On the first Sunday following January 6 every year, churches around the world observe something called *The Baptism of Jesus*; and as soon as we ministers

get those words out of our mouths, you can see the shades coming down for some folks. I understand that. You may be asking a couple of reasonable questions: “Isn’t this just some ancient ritual on a liturgical calendar that really doesn’t mean much to a modern world?” And the second question is just as serious: “In truth, in our world, why does Baptism even matter at all?”

And so, Baptism gets relegated to funny stories or cute photo opps. A family is riding home from church on Sunday noon. Their four-year-old son in the back seat of the car was baptized that morning. Suddenly, midway home, he bursts into tears. When his parents ask what on earth is wrong, he sniffles out the answer: “The minister who baptized me said I would be brought up in a Christian home. But I want to stay with you guys!” We all know the jokes.

And we all know the parental requests when the babies are brought forth in their new gorgeous white outfits (mine included!) which many families call “christening dresses,” despite the fact that most of us in the Protestant tradition don’t “christen” at all. To “christen” is to give a name. We assume the parents have already done that. We “baptize.” But it doesn’t really matter because the requests are not theological, are they? They are instead, “Reverend, may we get a few pictures of you holding the baby?” “Christen,” “Baptize,” who cares? It’s sometimes, really, just a family day complete with a photo opp.

So, if that's all Baptism means any more – a source of stale jokes or family pictures – why waste a whole sermon on it? The answer, at least one answer, is that when the gospel writers tell *The Jesus Story*, Baptism is crucial. Everything starts at the river where Jesus entered the waters and placed himself in the arms of his cousin John. *“the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* And despite the beauties and sentiment of the birth narratives, in truth the ministry and teachings and trials and triumphs and almost all that make us remember Jesus, took place after his baptism.

It was at the moment of Baptism that Jesus was claimed and called. Sure, the angels sang at Bethlehem, but God's voice spoke for the first time down at the river Jordan, acknowledging that Jesus was claimed by Someone special and called to do something special. So, when in liturgical services like the one for this Sunday, we preachers challenge our congregations to “Remember your baptism,” the challenge is actually to remember that you, too, just like Christ, belong to Someone special and are called to do something special.

Lately, we've been hearing confessions and also caught people who have travelled abroad despite what we'll call the Covid travel “rules”. Yes, these people made judgment errors, but they too are loved by God, and deserve our grace and

understanding. I am constantly reminded by my partner that there are always more to a story than the sound bite that makes the news. One person visiting an ailing family member, for example. Other stories sensationalized. All I know, sadly, is that one bad apple ruins the bunch, but in the end, we come rising out of the Jordan, knowing that God forgives, offers grace, and takes us on a new journey where God is well pleased with each one of us nonetheless. It is NOT our job to judge or condemn the actions of others, especially not before we look at ourselves first. We can love people into *becoming* loving people. That is the essence of the journey of baptism.

That is the first lesson of Baptism and a key reason why it is such a strong and vital part of our faith. God claims us at Baptism. God sends unearned, unconditional love our way. Theologically, we call that *grace*, and nowhere is it more visibly symbolized than in Baptism. “*This is My beloved child,*” whom this day I choose as my own, not by their merit, but by My mercy! That’s what God said to Jesus at the river and what God says to you and me. I choose you as part of My family. I choose you to possess Divine legacy. There is a great hymn of ours in *More Voices*: “*I have called you by your name, you are mine; I have gifted you and ask you now to shine. I will not abandon you; all my promises are true. You are gifted, called, and chosen; you are mine.*” God says, “in all things, in all times, in all places, in all circumstances, now and forever, I choose to love you whether

or not you are always lovable”. That’s the message of Baptism, one which should grip and inspire us: It is a symbol that we are claimed by Someone special.

And as was the case with Jesus, so it is with us, Baptism says that we are claimed by Someone special and we are called to do something special. “*And the Spirit descended upon him as a dove.*” The Spirit descends upon you and me, calling us not simply to be God’s children but also to be God's helpers in a wounded, weary world, waiting for vaccinations, waiting for peaceful resolution in the USA, waiting for Covid restrictions to ease up world-wide, waiting for hospitals to cope more easily. Claimed and *Called*. We wanted to live up to God’s love and the fact that God loves us into loving. And isn’t that the power of this ritual we observe today ... that we are claimed, usually in spite of ourselves, and once we become aware of how deeply we are loved *by* God, we find ourselves falling in love *with* God. And we express that love by how we do our living in the world. That, I think, is what it means to be baptized. It really is that simple. God loves us into loving.

Remember, every new beginning comes from some other beginning’s end. As Christmas fades into our past, and Epiphany unfolds as a new journey before us, shining God’s light into the corners of our hearts and lives, may we allow that light to fully illuminate us. A light turned on in a dark room is a change of fortune

for the eyes. It's easy to forget how many times God has directed our path, how many "coincidences" have transpired to bring us to this place today, how many times our eyes have cleared and we could finally see the way forward. It's easy to forget, so we must remember. Each step is a miracle of grace, bestowed upon us when that dove rose above the waters of baptism, calling and claiming us, and this is just the next part of the adventure.

As we remember whose we are, that we are God's beloved, who is well pleased with us, who offers us grace, no matter what, we journey into the unknown, with the presence of God's child with us. Remember: "Down by the Jordan, a prophet named John was baptizing,/ Preaching a message the people found bold and surprising:/ "God will forgive! Show that you'll change how you live!/ Surely God's new day is rising!"

So we dare to journey on/, led by faith through ways untrod,/ till we come at last like John/ to behold the Lamb of God./ Amen.