

Year A, January 8, 2017
1 Epiphany (Baptism of Our Lord)
Christ Church, Mexia

"God, our strength and our hope, grant us the courage of John the Baptist, constantly to speak the truth and boldly to rebuke injustice, with eyes open to recognize God among us."

The focus this Sunday on the baptism of Jesus offers us an opportunity to recall what baptism is and what it means or should mean for our lives. Of course, how different Christian denominations and churches view baptism is one of the few things that separates us. Charles Swindoll recalls a story in which, "the minister of a church of a different denomination contacted the pastor of a large downtown Baptist church and made an unusual request. (The minister of the liturgical church) had several folks who had recently joined his church who preferred to be baptized by immersion rather than sprinkling, the church's normal mode of baptism. This minister requested not only the use of the baptistery but that the (Baptist) pastor himself baptize those who came. This posed a dilemma – what if those being baptized weren't born again? Since it was the Baptist pastor's conviction that only (born-again) Christians should be baptized, he realized he couldn't with good conscience cooperate with the plan, but he wished to handle his answer with tact so as not to offend the other minister. So ... he wrote a letter, in which he included this humorous statement: 'We don't take in laundry, but we'll be happy to loan you our tub.'"

The "tub" of course is more similar to Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan, and the way most early baptisms were accomplished – hence the wonderful song, Shall We Gather at the River. Baptisms, by whatever means, then were and now are, often seen by many as "washing away" our sins. For many of us that might take a large body of water, and repeated attempts or a long immersion time. Purification before worship, especially sacrificing in the Temple, was a part of the Jewish tradition in the time of Jesus. So, special pools, called mikvehs, were constructed for the ritual cleansing. But that is not the only thing.

In our Outline of The Faith a.k.a. the Catechism, beginning on page 845 in the BCP, we are reminded that sacraments are "the outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace." Also, as Episcopalians, we believe that "the two great sacraments of the Gospel are Holy Baptism and the Holy Eucharist." In Holy Baptism then,

"...God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church," and by extension heirs of the kingdom of God.

So, it is a bit more than just washing away sins. If it were just that, then why would Jesus have been baptized? He was, we are told, without sin. And the Greek word *metanoia* which was used in the ancient texts in verse 11 to explain what is happening in John's baptism, suggests *transformation* or *turning* rather than simple repentance for sins. And it is not just about "joining" the church either.

Rodger Nishioka reminds us of a story about a young boy named Kyle. "Kyle was nowhere to be found, and I missed him. In the weeks following his baptism and confirmation on Pentecost Sunday, he was noticeably missing." Several others missed him too. The family had come when Kyle was in the fifth grade. They came sporadically but later accepted an offer to join the confirmation class. Kyle rarely missed a class or event, showed great promise, and bonded with others in the class. The celebration on Pentecost was a great event, but that's where it pretty much ended. That's when I knew that we had done something wrong. When I visited the family, they seemed surprised. The mother said "... I thought he was all done, I mean he was baptized and confirmed and everything. Isn't he done?"

Isn't it that way for many? Been there – done that! Now what? The baptism of Jesus was not the end of Jesus' ministry, it was the beginning. And so, our baptism is meant to be the beginning of our own ministry and the basis for our future spiritual growth. Kyle and his family came back to church, by the way, and seemed a little relieved that the journey was not over, but just beginning – the beginning of a remarkable journey through life with God.

Water has been and is a necessary part of our daily life. For example, how long can you live without water? Depending on the circumstances, medical science documents from a few hours to 8-10 days, maximum. Well, in Martin Luther's *Small Catechism* he attributed the efficacy of baptism to the Word of God "in and with the water." As Steven Driver puts it: "By entering this water, Jesus did not seek his own repentance, for he had nothing of which to repent. Instead, Jesus offered himself as the answer to John's call for all people to repent." And he demonstrates to us, that while water is necessary for our human life, the water of baptism, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, is necessary for everlasting life. Therefore, the water of baptism is extremely important.

Please note that the Trinity is present at his baptism – Jesus, the Word, of course; God, the Creator praising his son, and the Holy Spirit descending. If he see it this way, then like Gregory of Nyssa, we can see in this story of Jesus' baptism that there is an affinity between humanity and God. And we should be able to witness, to feel, this in the Holy Eucharist as well. These two Sacraments then, quite simply, are where heaven and earth meet.

Furthermore, as Will Willimon, the prolific writer, master preacher and a bishop of the Methodist Church says, "In baptism we are initiated, crowned, chosen, embraced, washed, adopted, gifted, reborn, killed, and thereby sent forth and redeemed. We are identified as one of God's own, then assigned our place and our job within the kingdom of God." He reminds us that as baptized Christians it is our duty to help shape others. Like Greg Garrett, a priest in our diocese, points out: "Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* offers a potent vision of a community that has the potential to form those under its charge in one or two ways: into people of tolerance, love, and bravery, or into people of fear, bigotry, and greed. Scout Finch, who narrates the novel, and her brother Jem are formed by their father Atticus, their maid Calpurnia, their neighbors, and by others into people with great virtues – what we probably call Christian virtues." This story and others of community formation then may help us to understand our role in shaping and supporting those with whom we interact.

L.R. Knost puts it this way: "Do not be dismayed by the brokenness of the world. All things break. And all things can be mended. Not with time, as they say, but with intention. So, go. Love intentionally, extravagantly, unconditionally. The broken world waits in darkness for the light that is in you." So, listen carefully, and with your heart as well as your ears, as we reconfirm our baptismal vows today. Listen and let yourself be transformed and energized to continue the mission of the church, the mission that Jesus began at his baptism.

In the name of the One God - the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.
Amen.