

Sermon January 13, 2019 The Baptism of The Lord

[In Anglican churches, every part of the room is symbolic and has a meaning. This is also true in theatres for example. In that setting, upstage house left means something different from centre stage or downstage house right. Actor's and directors make use of that language of space in unfolding and interpreting the meaning of a play. A similar dynamic applies in a church. We pray the meaning of this church simply be moving around in it with intention, and also when we care for it, in the ministry of the altar guild, etc.. This is why we do processions of different kinds at different festivals and seasons: in order to pray the sacramental language of the church. In the sacramental tradition of Anglicanism, the physical world - including the natural world, our bodies, and everything God has made - is good: a sign of God's presence. So in the liturgy we need prayer with our bodies as well as our minds.

That is why I'm standing here at the font today: because it is the visible symbol in this place of what today is all about: The Baptism of Our Lord in the River Jordan in the early decades of the common era.]

We have at least two baptisms to celebrate today. The baptism of Our Lord of course, and our own baptisms. I also give thanks for the baptism of everyone around me in the christian communities because I received such strength and encouragement from the faith of all of you.

One of the first things to say about baptism is that it is a sacrament. A sacrament. That is just so important to us, to our life together, to our purpose as a church, to know what a sacrament is. So I want to try and do a little refresher on sacraments today in a kind of old timey way, if you'll permit me. Because it is very clear and very grounded in the 3 core values of scripture, reason, and tradition - the so called 'three legged stool' of Anglicanism - I want to take us all back to the catechism in the Book of Common Prayer. So please find the little red prayer book in your pew rack in front of you and turn to the section on sacraments, page 550. BCP p. 550 ....

## THE SACRAMENTS

### Catechist.

How many Sacraments has Christ ordained in his Church?

**Answer.** Christ has ordained two Sacraments, as generally necessary to salvation; that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord, which is the Holy Communion.

**Catechist.** What do you mean by this word Sacrament?

**Answer.** I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, given to us by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive this grace, and a pledge to assure us thereof.

**Catechist.** How many parts are there in a Sacrament?

**Answer.** Two; the outward visible sign, and the inward spiritual grace.

**Catechist.** What is the outward visible sign in Baptism?

**Answer.** Water; in which the person is baptized In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

**Catechist.** What is the inward and spiritual grace in Baptism?

## THE CATECHISM

551

**Answer.** A death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness; for being by nature born into man's sinful state, we are hereby made the children of grace by the power of the Holy Spirit.

**Catechist.** What is required of persons to be baptized?

**Answer.** Repentance; whereby they forsake sin, which separates them from God: and faith; whereby they stedfastly believe the promises of God made to them in that Sacrament.

**Catechist.** Why then are infants baptized?

**Answer.** Infants are baptized so that, being

received into Christ's Church, they may grow in grace and be trained in the household of faith.

**Catechist.** How can infants promise repentance and faith?

**Answer.** Their Godfathers and Godmothers make the promise for them.

**Catechist.** When do they take this promise upon themselves?

**Answer.** When they are confirmed by the Bishop and, through prayer and the laying on of hands, are strengthened by the Holy Spirit. *[next part is about Eucharist....]*

So that was great, that told us a lot about what a sacrament is, coming out of the prayerbook tradition. But what about the scriptures? What about the gospel story of the baptism? What is John doing? Why is he baptizing? What is this all about? Why is he out there in the wilderness with this huge crowd of people dunking them in the river? Why? What is the purpose?

Well, a clue to the purpose lies in the location, an historic one for Jews. It is across this river that the Jewish people had come more than a thousand years before to enter this land of Canaan, this promised land. John is taking the people out of Jerusalem and the Judean countryside and crossing with them *out* of the promised land back into the wilderness. He's doing it because he thinks that's where they really are spiritually. He feels that in their

occupied condition they have lost their claim to the promised land and their Jewishness by their continual compromises with various foreign overlords, most recently Imperial Rome. So he is trying to restart their integrity by taking them back to the wilderness, where their ancestors had wandered forty years before entering the land promised to Abraham, and then crossing with them back *into* the promised land, dunking them in the river on the way, to wash away or *baptize* them of their sins of secular compromise. He wants to remind them who they are and whose they are, and have them start again, taking back the promised land.

Tradition tells us that he is doing the dunking, the baptizing in a particular way. He stands deep in the river and he invites each person to put their life in his hands. He holds them in the water, leaning back or even floating on his arm. He puts his hand over their mouth and nose, and he holds them under the water. It is a profound act of trust. If he wanted to, he could simply hold them there. They would be helpless. He holds each life in his hands. In this way each baptism is a death. And then it is a resurrection. He wants them to know, 'The integrity of your relationship with God and the faith that is given you is a matter of life and death. In the River Jordan, in baptism, die to the old life and rise to the new.'

The gospels tell us that he is baptizing all of Jerusalem and the whole Judean countryside in this way. Is it hundreds? Is it thousands of people? We don't know. It's a lot. It could be all day long, dunk, dunk, dunk. Perhaps for days at a time.

But something different happens for Jesus. All four gospels agree on that. A rare moment where all four agree. A bird lands on Him. All four canonical gospels mention it. A dove. And who knows, it could have just been a dove looking for a place land. Who knows? It could have been a more mystical vision of the Holy Spirit. Luke clearly says that it was in bodily form like a dove. All I know is that if I ever baptize someone and a *dove* lands on them (or any other bird for that matter), I will find it profoundly moving and meaningful. It would be a thing I would never forget and I would just have to tell people about. More than words ever could, it would show me in a primal way, the affirmation of the Creator. It would make me think that perhaps God had a purpose and a plan for that person. If that person went on to do incredible things that transformed the community, it would all - in make sense to me. I think it would have that meaning whether or not I had ever read of such a thing in the Bible.

But there is more.

The three synoptic gospels agree that some words were heard, a voice from heaven, saying, “You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased.” After preaching, reflecting, and teaching about these words for 20 years, I have come to the conclusion that these words are said to all of us. The same voice from heaven seeks to convey to each of our hearts, this same message of love and affirmation. The purpose is to tell us who we are and whose we are. I truly believe God is saying these words *now*, to each and every human being. If I stop and think about it I might say that it doesn't stop with human beings. That this voice of love is what calls the entire cosmos and the entirety of nature into being.

But what is different about Jesus is that He hears it. He is coming up out of the water, coming back to life from being in the place of death under the water, and He hears it. He knows it is speaking to Him and it changes everything for Him. He wakes up. He realizes, ‘I will never want for anything ever again. In this understanding of God's love I am full. I am complete. I have a new purpose. I have regained the original purpose for which God created me. I and the Father are one.’

He is able to go out into the desert after that and fast for forty days and forty nights *because is no longer hungry*. He is full of the word of God. After that He becomes a source of this message of love, this awakening, for everyone He meets.

This is the purpose of baptism. This is why we do this sacrament. To have this same spiritual awakening that Jesus had. The same one. To die to the old life, wash it away, and rise to the new. To hear from God, her words of love and affirmation, meant in a special way for each of us, so that each of *knows* that we are loved, that we *are* the beloved, that being loved is the essence of our being, and perhaps most importantly, to have each of us know that every single person around us is God's beloved too, no matter what we may think of them, or feel about them at times. In baptism we hope to become rivers of this nourishing love which God sends through us to feed his people. In baptism we hope to have this awakening again, be sustained by God's love throughout our lives, and to *sustain others* with God's love as well. So let's gather at the font.

- Thanksgiving over the water
- sign of the cross, to renew the awakening of baptism