

The Feast of the Baptism of Christ
January 8, 2012

Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
MARK 1:4-11

ABOUT BAPTISM

Today, “it’s *all about baptism*” -- for everyone, at both services, not just for the baptismal candidate at 10:30, not just for her family, godparents and friends, but for each and all of us. Baptism, as the Catechism (page 858 in The Book of Common Prayer tells us), “is the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ’s Body, the Church, and inheritors of the Kingdom of God.” This is a Big Deal.

There are five occasions during the Church Year when holy baptism is especially appropriate, and when there are no baptisms or at other services besides one with baptisms on those days the Renewal of Baptismal Vows may take the place of the Nicene Creed at the Eucharist, as we are doing today at the 8 o’clock service, and as we did at the 10:30 service last All Saints’ Sunday when we celebrated baptism at 8 o’clock. Today, like All Saints’ Sunday, is another one of those five great occasions listed on page 312 in The Book of Common Prayer: the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We started out our scripture readings today with the opening words of the entire Bible: the beginning of the creative acts of God as focused on in the Bible. The Creation is not over -- God is still at work creating -- and these words do not, in fact, speak about the *very* beginning, but some time shortly after the beginning (however many billion years ago) when there were atoms and molecules but nothing had yet been given *meaning* and *purpose* by God. The biblical writer of this passage was not interested in God’s action in making the universe out of nothing, but in God’s ongoing actions in moving matter and energy from primordial *chaos* into *Creation*.

God does this by naming and giving meaning and purpose to different parts of Creation. “God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night.” On through the first Creation story in Genesis 1:1-2:4 God names and gives meaning and purpose to different elements of God’s Creation, including human beings, male and female, both equally “made in the image of God.”

God made and makes people in God’s image and gives us human beings special honor *and* special responsibilities and stewards of the Creation. Since the beginning of time, however, human beings have used our God-given gifts and status to rebel against God, to become estranged one from another, and to refuse to experience the holy community which God intended for us.

God did not give up on human beings, but invited and invites us to repent and return to God, to repent and experience God's forgiveness and to begin to be healed as individuals, as communities and as a planet.

John the Baptist came to his fellow Jews 2,000 years ago in the Holy Land "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" as today's Gospel tells us. He made such an impact that a generation later and hundreds of miles from where he preached there were people St. Paul met in Ephesus who had been baptized into John's baptism of repentance of sins, as we hear in the reading from Acts. Repentance, Paul told them, is just the beginning: baptism *in the Name of Jesus* also means receiving the Holy Spirit and being empowered and commissioned for ministry in Christ's name.

We recall all this in our liturgy today. Parents and Godparents are asked to make vows *for themselves* as well as on behalf of the baptismal candidate. They vow to "be responsible for the child you present is brought up in the Christian faith and life" -- *and* anyone here who has ever brought their child for baptism or served as a godparent for someone else's child has made the same vow, so let us remember *all* Christian parents and godparents today.

The second vow is "Will you by your prayers and witness help this child to grow into the full stature of Christ?" *WOW*. That means every baptized person has *unlimited spiritual potential*. *All of us* who are baptized. We may have been told over the years what we're *not* good at -- perhaps by a parent or an older sibling or a teacher or a former employer, but whatever else may be said about each and every one of us, *God* says we have *unlimited spiritual potential for good*.

To even start to realize that potential, however, we have to get on the right track, so candidates who can speak for themselves and parents and godparents of infants continue to make vows, first renouncing three different kinds of *evil*. These are not abstractions: certainly anyone who serves as a police officer, like the father of Isabel, our baptismal candidate, has plenty of encounters with what The Book of Common Prayer calls "the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God." Let's start with drug dealers, gangs and organizations of career criminals as a few of "the evil powers of this world". And anyone who works in the Emergency Room of a hospital in our city, as does Isabel's mother, has to care all too often for the battered and bleeding victims of evil powers and victims of individuals who express their sinfulness by doing serious harm to others. Most Christian ministry is done by lay people and done far beyond the walls of churches, like those ministries.

These renunciations of evil are for *all* of us; and we can all find occasions in our professional and personal lives far beyond the walls of this church to live out the renunciation of evil.

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But renouncing evil is not enough. In fact, without help, we *will* become exhausted as we renounce evil again and again, and we either give up and collapse or we yield to one temptation or another. *We need help*. And *that* is why Jesus showed up for work: to help us.

So it is that the next question is, “Do you *turn* to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior”? To do this is to admit that we *need* a Savior who can, wants to and *will* save us not only from our sins but from the tidal waves of the sins of others which would swamp our defenses without his help. “Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?” “Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?” With those promises, a candidate for baptism is ready -- except that she or he needs a *community* as well as a personal relationship with the Savior. So it is that the *congregation* is asked, “Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support this person in her life in Christ?” “It takes a village” to raise a Christian -- and this is Isabel’s first Christian village. And it is the Christian village for *all* of our members and clergy: with God’s help, we are raising *each other* and the whole church to be closer to Christ.

How does the entire congregation live out this vow? By affirming the Baptismal Covenant, as we will do as part of our worship at both services today. The Baptismal Covenant is “the job description of being a Christian”: the Apostles’ Creed, and five questions which prod us to commit and re-commit and re-re-commit ourselves to *doing things* as a result of what we believe.

We commit ourselves to continuing in “the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers” -- to participating in the *worship* life of a Christian community. Why worship? Well, we all need to look in the mirror every morning and say, “There is a God -- and it isn’t me.” The best way to reinforce this is to worship as part of a community.

Then there is commitment to *holiness of life* in and beyond church participation. We commit ourselves to persevering “in resisting evil, and whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord.” That includes repenting of those *unglamorous* sins of *omission* -- those times we have failed to move ourselves to do the right thing and have pretended that we can keep our “spiritual transmissions” in “neutral.”

We renew our commitment to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of Christ.” The fact that people are offered forgiveness and a fresh start, guidance, love and strength from God and a caring, inclusive church community is all very Good News, and there are plenty of people *you know* [I sweep my arms around the congregation] who are very hungry for good news like this. The fact is that parish priests like me spend most of our time with people who are already active Christians: the evangelists for a congregation are mainly the lay members. Ask God to remind you who they people who know who need to hear this good news are and how best for *you* to share the good News of Christ with them.

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“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” *All* persons? Now, that’s *hard*. We are not commanded to endorse everyone’s *behavior* -- “Love the sinner and hate the sin” St. Augustine said -- but we are commanded to love *them*. As a parent, I have had occasion to say to my son, “I love *you* but this particular *behavior* is unacceptable.” This is spiritual work which takes as much spiritual training as playing a

competitive sport well takes athletic training, which is why we talk about *lifelong Christian formation*.

And finally, “Will you strive for justice and peace among *all* people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” Yes, folks, that means engaging the struggle for peace and justice in large public matters, just as Moses did when he led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt into freedom, just as Peter did when he stood up to the very same people who only weeks earlier had turned Jesus over to be crucified by the Roman Empire. We can and will differ as to exactly what to do and how to do it, but the struggle for justice and peace is not optional for Christians.

Wow. It’s only January 8, and what a lot of “New year’s resolutions” we have! No wonder we say, “I will, with God’s help” to the questions in the Baptismal Covenant.

Baptized, forgiven, commissioned, empowered people, **think what we can do *with God’s help!***

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