

January 9th, 2022

First after Epiphany, Year C Baptism of Jesus

Isaiah 43:1-7

Psalm 29

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, 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."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The week I was to be baptized, in 1986, I remember feeling under qualified, like I was not ready.

As many of you know I was 24 years old; I had begun attending an Episcopal church a few months before, and Bishop Lee was coming for their annual visit in June; I would be baptized and confirmed in the service.

I had attended a Newcomers Class, learned a bit about the Book of Common Prayer and church history, and some of the quirky and interesting ways that Episcopalians differ from other Protestant Christians.

But as the date got closer for my baptism, I went to see my priest and now dear friend, Harold Hallock, and shared my anxiety, my doubts that I was perhaps not ready, not prepared enough, to be baptized.

Isn't it amazing how some conversations stay so vivid in our memories? I remember now, 36 years later, so clearly what Harold told me. He listened to my worries, and then explained baptism to me, in just a few words, that have stayed with me for my whole journey thus far as a Christian.

Harold told me that I did not need to be ready, I did not need to know all the answers, I did not need to be all done, in order to be baptized. Harold told me: Baptism is a beginning not the end.

I did not need to learn everything, understand everything, be sure of everything, I simply needed to be ready to begin.

I have heard Harold's words in my heart over the past 36 years and have used them to explain baptism to others.

Baptism is a beginning, our willingness to start.

I appreciated too that Harold called it A beginning, not THE beginning. If he had said THE beginning, my first 24 years would have been relegated to wasted time, time spent simply idling in neutral, waiting to be baptized.

A beginning honored the path I had taken to be baptized, and assured me that God had been with me through those years. And now it was time for this beginning.

On this day that we leave behind all the celebrations of Christmas, and we turn to the baptism of Jesus, we can see several ways that beginnings echo through this day.

We see so clearly that Jesus, at 30 years old, knows it is time for his earthly ministry and witness to begin, and thus he goes to the Jordan River to be baptized by his cousin John.

After Jesus has been submerged in the water, he comes up into the sunshine, and he begins to pray.

And a dove descends upon him, the manifestation of the Holy Spirit with him, and God's voice from heaven is heard:

You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

Jesus is at a high-stakes beginning at his baptism, he is entering into those three

years of his ministry, teaching, preaching, healing; God so close to God's creation, walking ahead of us on life's paths, valleys and hilltops, Emmanuel, God with us.

And God does not say to Jesus: Are you ready? Have you studied enough? Are you sure you can do this?

No, instead, God expresses love, deep love for Jesus, calling him "the Beloved", as Jesus, our brother, begins his ministry.

Another beginning echoes in the prayer on the cover of our bulletin today. This beautiful prayer by the theologian Howard Thurman was written in the early 1970s, but seems fresh to me each year, as we watch the Wise Men disappear into the deserts, each year as we take down the tree, each year as we wrap up the lights and the ribbons.

Each year this prayer tells us, it is time for a beginning.

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart. Amen.*

Our call anew each year: The work of Christmas begins.

And to do this work, we return today, on this remembrance of the baptism of Jesus, to our own Baptismal Covenant. Whether we were a tiny baby, a child, a teen or an adult when we were baptized, the Baptismal Covenant holds and binds

each of us, and walks us into this new beginning again:
As the work of Christmas begins.

In a few minutes we will read our Baptismal Covenant in call and response, and will read it in place of the creeds each Sunday in the season of Epiphany.

The Coveant inclides the five questions that all ask in some way will we begin again in our walk as Christians, will we begin again to do the work of Christmas:

“Will you continue in the apostles’ teachings....and in the prayers?”

“Will you persevere in resisting evil...?”

“Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?”

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons loving your neighbor as yourself?”

“Will you....respect the dignity of every human being?”

Will you:

find the lost,

heal the broken,

feed the hungry,

release the prisoner,

rebuild the nations,

bring peace among people,

make music in the heart?

That last line of Thurman’s prayer always surprises me a little:

“To make music in the heart”.

It may seem a bit out of place after “finding, healing, feeding”.

But our call is not only to provide the basics for those in need, but also to share, and share generously the beauty and wonder of God’s world.

People need food AND music.

The Book Group at SMWC is reading a book by John Philip Newell on Celtic Christianity.

The author shares one ancient prayer attributed to St. Brigid, that speaks of care for the stranger, that immediately echoed for me our prayer today from Howard Thurman:

*We saw a stranger yesterday,
We put food in the eating place,
Drink in the drinking place,
Music in the listening place,
and with the sacred name of the triune God,
He blessed us and our home,
Our cattle and our dear ones.
As the lark says in her song,
'Often, often often goes Christ in the stranger's guise.'
(Sacred Earth Sacred Soul John Philip Newell)*

Food and drink for the body, and music too, not a luxury but a necessity for caring for our souls, and the souls of others.

It is the first Sunday after Epiphany, and time for a beginning, a reminder of our baptismal covenant, a reminder of our God sending us forth into a new beginning, sending us even if we are not certain we are ready, sending us even if we are not at all sure we are smart enough or prepared enough.

But our God of love and compassion, sending us into this new beginning with love, love enfolding us, so we may offer:

*To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart. Amen.*

