

First Sunday after Epiphany: Baptism of our Lord

January 8, 2023

Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

Psalm 29

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Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord. It is one of a handful of Feast Days designated by our prayer book for candidates to be presented for Holy Baptism and, when no candidates are present, to renew our own baptismal covenant. Our gospel reading invites us to listen again to the voice of John in the wilderness, to renounce again the cosmic, systemic, and personal forces of evil that distort our relationships with God, one another, the earth, and ourselves. We are invited to turn again toward Christ, to allow John's pointing arm to direct our gaze away from all that we have renounced and toward the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.

Renewing our baptismal vows is not like renewing our driver's license or car registration. Rather, it is a call to recommitment, to revive our desire to follow in the Way of Christ. The Way of Christ is guided by the apostles' teaching, supported in the fellowship we share, and sustained by worship and prayer. It demands that we discern and name the forces of sin that exist in the world and within ourselves and to actively resist them. The Way of Christ is a call to bear witness – in word and deed – to the liberating and transforming power of God. It requires us to seek and serve Christ in the "Other," to pay attention to the world around us, and to strive for justice and peace in all that we do.

These are no small things to which we commit. We gather today in the shadow of the two-year anniversary of a protest-turned-riot that engulfed our capital. We gather in the wake of one of the most violent years for Black, Indigenous, People of Color, and other minority communities. We carry the weight of a pandemic that continues to take lives. And all of this in addition to personal matters of grief and burdens that are part of our regular experiences of life.

To renew our baptismal vows in this present moment is a heavy call that will require us to risk our own comforts, safety, and privileges. But we need not carry this weight on our own. We have received the Holy Spirit, the one who hovered over the formless earth at creation and whose descent into Christ at his baptism tore open the heavens. The Spirit incorporates us into a new life, a life that is not bound by the norms and categories of this world. The Spirit gives us the wisdom to discern the goodness of God's creation and to see clearly the forces of sin that distort the goodness of all that God created. The Spirit empowers us to boldly name those forces and renounce them as we journey in the Way of Christ.

Through the Spirit we are claimed by Christ, named as children of God, united not only with God as individuals, but with each other as the Body of Christ. Our unity with one another is not found in our shared values or beliefs, nor is it found in our shared doctrines or dogmas. Our unity is found in our common adoption as children of God and as co-participants in the mystery of salvation. In baptism we are given a new identity that enables us to enter into the trinitarian mystery of salvation so that we might be conformed to Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit and united in love to Creator of all.

This new identity is not a mere façade. In baptism, the meaning of our life and our purpose is radically reoriented toward the divine life and purpose. Through the Holy Spirit we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection, and so we are also united with *his* life and purpose. The prayer book defines this as the mission to restore all people to unity with God. Through baptism we are both enlisted into and empowered to take up the ministry of reconciliation given to us by Christ.

The ministry of reconciliation can seem an impossible call in our context of violent division and scathing political discourse. How are we to engage in this ministry when it seems true reconciliation with God, with one another, with the earth, with ourselves seems so far out of reach? We engage in this ministry with nothing less than God's help! We commit to be faithful in our meeting together, to continue learning about the faith that's been handed down to us and to participate in the Sacraments of the Church. We commit to be faithful in resisting evil, in turning away from the practices of our world that diminish one another and creation. We commit to proclaim in word and deed the Good News of God in Christ. We commit to seeking and serving Christ in all people, loving our neighbors as ourselves. We commit to striving for justice and peace among *all* people, respecting the dignity of every human being. Yes, these are difficult and risky commitments. They will inevitably put us at odds with the status quo and general ideologies that govern our social, political, and economic order. But we do not do this alone – we have God as our help and we have one another for support.

During seminary, I was part of a small group that met weekly for self-examination, mutual-care and -discernment. Our time together was governed by one question, "How goes your soul before God?" The question was an invitation to examine our lives and discern with one another how God was speaking and moving in and among us. It is a question that seems very appropriate on this occasion as we prepare to renew our vows to God. How goes your soul before God? This question is not meant to be a practice of self-flagellation. It is not an exercise in beating ourselves up because we're not good enough or because we've made mistakes or because we think we're failing. Rather, like a mirror it shows me those areas of my life that need healing. It shows me those areas of my life in which I'm still blinded by privilege. It shows me those areas in my life that leave me feeling unworthy of God's love and grace. But, this question also functions like a window, allowing me to see beyond myself to the vision God has cast for all of creation, to see the impossible possibilities that God works in us so that we might find true and lasting peace.

How goes your soul before God?

Friends, it is well, it is well with my soul. Not because the world is free of strife and conflict, not because I've somehow attained perfection, but because our God has empowered us to live as children of God, to embody a way of life different from the world, to proclaim the Way of Christ in all that we do and say. Living into our baptismal vows is not dependent on our effort alone – this is no bootstrap-theology! Rather, it depends upon the faithfulness of God to accomplish in us all that is necessary to liberate us from the forces of sin and evil that exist within and around us – and this, my friends, really *is* good news! As we renew our baptismal covenant, let us hold onto this truth: God offers us all the help we need to fulfill our vows – all we have to do is accept the gift of grace!

May God, indeed, grant us the grace to keep the covenant we have made and to boldly confess Jesus as Lord and Savior.