



The Baptism of Our Lord (B)
The First Sunday after the Epiphany
January 7, 2018
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+O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

A doctoral student at the University of California who “researches histories and cultures of racism and anti-Semitism” recently wrote that “All utopias are well manicured lies.” In history, there have been many attempts at fashioning a utopian society. In the human spirit, there seems to be a strong desire to form and shape life into a structure in which all can experience a good life through the sacrifice of self for the good of the whole. (Ben Ratskoff. Review of “Call me by your name”. January 5, 2018. (www.advocate.com))

Today, we live in a kind of post-rational society of facts verses fiction and authentic verses ‘inauthentic’ news. Yet in spite of it all, there still exists within the human person a strong pull towards a world of ‘good’ for the sake of the whole. We long for a world in which as many of us as possible can live in peace with our neighbor.

We long for a world not of escalating prosperity for some. We long for a world where the ‘little guy’, the worker who works part-time jobs to try and get ahead, the student who struggles to pay for college, or the young adult who ‘dreams’ of American citizenship can and will succeed.

We recognize that success in life is predicated on a host of variables. Those variables are not ‘pie-in-the-sky’ dreams but the reality of what it means to face the challenges of life with clear rational thinking.

For us as Christians, our dreams and “thinking” are formed and shaped by values of Christian discipleship. Like those who have gone before us, we are formed and shaped by the Scriptures, examples of holy men and women, and the person of Jesus, the man from Nazareth who went to the Jordan River to be baptized by John.

Last week, I thought about getting into the head of John the Baptizer. I wondered what was rattling around in his head and what he was feeling in his heart when he encountered Jesus. Yes, he knew that he was the cousin of Jesus. Recall if you will, the encounter in Luke’s Gospel when Mary with child greets her cousin, Elizabeth, also with child. That child was John who would become known as John, the Baptizer.

The Scriptures don’t tell us about the relationship between Jesus and John until we see the event unfold in the Jordan River. How important it is that this is the first story in the Gospel of Mark. There is no birth narrative. There is no chronicle from Ancestry.com about the origin of Jesus. Here in Mark, the Gospel begins with John the Baptizer and Jesus who went to be baptized along with many others.

The Gospel tells us that it was in the Jordan that John was baptizing what must have been hundreds of people, people who believed in John and who sought to be cleansed from sin. I can picture a great long line of people standing and waiting in the scorching hot sun. From my own experience at the Jordan, I can testify that in is very hot there especially in the summer. Somewhere in that long line was the ordinary looking guy, Jesus. Can we imagine John’s reaction when he saw Jesus?

We know that John awaited one whose sandals he was not worthy to untie, but did he know that that ordinary looking guy, from an ordinary village called Nazareth, was the promised one of the ages? My guess is that the answer would have been “no” at least until the voice of God shattered the silence: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Today, the scene from the Gospel of Mark is not just about Jesus being baptized by John. After all, Jesus, who knew no sin, had no need to be baptized and therefore cleansed. The passage points to a much greater reality.

For me, this Gospel passage is about the unity of heaven and earth, a brief moment in time, a vertical punctuation in the timeline of the universe. The 'stars' aligned, and Father, Son and Holy Spirit united in an explosion of miraculous light.

The Season of the Epiphany is a season of light and illumination. Taking its cue from the star, the light which guided the Magi and which hovered over the manger at Jesus' birth, it is light that is at the core of this liturgical season. During Epiphany, we seek light and pray that that light will illumine our path in following Jesus.

The Baptism of Jesus was not about freeing Jesus from sin. It was about anointing him in to mission. Jesus was called by his God, the Father, to bring about the Kingdom of God, the Reign of God, into the world!

Can we feel how powerful the Baptism of Jesus was for John *and* for Jesus! Water, yes. The Holy Spirit, yes. The voice of God, yes, a voice proclaiming an inauguration of who Jesus is for the world. Through his life, death and resurrection, Jesus would be and is the Redeemer of the world and the lover of all humankind.

It gives me great pleasure to see more of us especially our children dipping fingers into one of the two fonts and making the Sign of the Cross with blessed water. That sign of the Cross reminds us that we are consecrated in the Name of Jesus at Baptism and are the beloved of God in whom God is pleased. We are reminded that we are God's own, God's children, sealed forever by water and the Spirit.

I don't think that we are likely to bring about a utopian society in our world. We are called to do all we can to bring about the reign of God, the peace and compassion of God. We are called to seek God's forgiveness and reconciliation in response to God's love in Jesus.

When you and I seek forgiveness for those times in which we have offended someone, we seek reconciliation. We seek peace and calm. When we also seek forgiveness from God, we discover "that 'repent' means more than be sorry for one's sins'. It means a complete change of life, of values, of priorities. It means a total re-orientation of life – a renouncing of the past and the embracing of the Kingdom." (<http://disclosingnewworlds.net/baptism-of-jesus-year-b/>) It means embracing God's love in new and exciting ways in Jesus.

God's love transforms the ordinariness of who we are into the beloved of God, extraordinary people of God called to do all we can to transform the world into God's world. That world, that Kingdom, that Reign, is about love, justice, peace and mercy.

Jesus was and is the model. We are called to be like him as best we can. How we go about that can only be determined by each of us. I believe that we are here this morning to be empowered to do just that. The grace to make it a reality is already ours, and oh, what a blessing that is for us as followers of Jesus. Amen.