

The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ (Year B)

**Picture, Ponder, Pray**

Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The first rector for whom I worked after I was ordained had an interesting formula for studying the Scriptures. After reading a passage, he did three things, all of which begin with the letter P: *picture, ponder, pray*.

We have just heard Luke's version of the baptism of Jesus, and I invite you to think about it with me in that style. First, picture the scene: the banks of the River Jordan, somewhere downstream from the Sea of Galilee, murky brown water flowing south to the Dead Sea. People have gathered from all over—all sorts and conditions of people, rich and poor, farmers and townsfolk, men and women, deeply religious and merely curious. They have come to hear the famous and strange preacher named John, who has been calling loudly for repentance and change in Israel, exhorting ordinary people to turn back to God and to be baptized as a sign of cleansing and starting over. Time is short, John has cried; the Kingdom of God is not far off. The baptism he offers, with water, is a preparation for the One who is coming with a more powerful baptism of the Holy Spirit--the Wind and fire of God.

And somewhere among the crowds who come to hear John preach is that One. Luke wastes no time describing a meeting between John and Jesus; those events are secondary. Instead, Luke focuses on *what happens* once Jesus has been baptized.

“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying,” he says, glossing over the details and getting down to the heart of the matter, “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.’” Like a movie by Cecil B. DeMille or Stephen Spielberg, clouds roll back—even the sky opens up somehow—and down from the opening flies a dove. This is a God-event, a theophany, a self-revealing of God to those who can see and hear. From Luke's telling of it, we don't know whether great crowds of people noticed the commotion, or whether anybody else was even there. Maybe only Jesus saw the sky and the bird and heard the Voice from heaven in the stillness of his prayerful soul. Picture it.

And ponder what it could mean. Visions and voices are not easy to share with other people. Have you ever had a sense of the presence of God? It may have been a “still, small voice” inside you, comforting or encouraging or warning you. It may have been a physical feeling almost like a touch or embrace. It may have been a vivid dream or a fleeting, wide-awake picture of something for your eyes only, intangible, almost indescribable, but very real. Those are my experiences, anyway; you may have had others. What makes me sure they are theophanies, or experiences of God, is that they are soaked and rooted in prayer, and they have changed my life. I recall them as turning points: my direction changed, a little or a lot; and if I was stuck somehow, I was suddenly able to see better where I should go and start moving that way.

Jesus had been baptized and was praying. He had taken advantage of John's pointing out a path to a richer, truer, better relationship with God. His baptism was not, for him at least, a cleansing from sin; but it was a sign of his belonging to a race of sinners who seek for God. He belonged to us, to humanity, with all our quirks and

problems, so he was baptized. He belonged to God, so he prayed. His prayer was not a laundry list of hopes and fears (his own or others'), but a conversation with the Beloved, intimate and relaxed. And in his baptism and in his prayer, God was revealed: revealed *to* Jesus as loving Parent, well pleased with the Beloved Son; revealed *in* Jesus, to everyone who crossed his path after that.

Picture Jesus, baptized and praying. Step back, and in a frame the same size and shape, picture yourself, baptized and praying. Ponder the similarities and the differences—only you can do that. What called you to be baptized? Were you even aware of it when it happened? What did it mean to you to become a baptized person? Has it changed your life—marking a turning point or launching point? Picture the event, as you recall it or as it was told to you. Ponder its effect in your life. And pray.

Over the years, I've talked with folks who remembered many different things about their baptisms. One who was baptized at thirteen by full immersion experienced it as a rite of passage, a step into adulthood and grown-up responsibility in his church. One who was "sprinkled" not once but twice as a ten-year-old and again at fourteen in one tradition, joined a church of another tradition at twenty and faced full immersion with some real fear. Another person, baptized at age four, recalled it as a way to please some very important adults. A fourth person found out well along in life that though she had always thought she was baptized, no baptism had ever taken place; she felt something akin to shame and fear, until a very special opportunity arose and she found in being baptized a sense of being welcomed into "the family." I don't remember my own baptism—I was only four and a half months old—but I was told the water ran down my nose and into my mouth. The differences among such recollections and understandings intrigue me and set me pondering: it's as if there are two or three categories or "ages" of baptism.

How many here were baptized as infants or small children and don't remember your baptism? I may be going a little high on the age range here, but it seems that up to about the age of nine, baptism is something your family does to you. Until thirty years ago or so, baptism was often seen in the Episcopal Church as a pastoral rite, privately celebrated with family in a side chapel on a Saturday afternoon. The baby wore an heirloom christening gown with an almost magical power to evoke past generations, the grannies and aunties all came, and there could be a sense of relief that now the child was safely stenciled "Property of Heaven" and insured against eternal hellfire.

Well, we chuckle: it's terrible theology, trust me! But there is a grain of sense in it: *through no effort of the child being baptized, he is marked* as Christ's own forever; the faith of his family and friends makes the baby part of the family, safe and secure. Their active faith, and God's active grace, are all that is necessary. The claim is made on both sides, and God, at least, will never break it.

If you were baptized between the ages of ten and, say, twenty-four, then I think maybe something a little different happened (at least from your point of view—not God's so much—that's still all about grace). Puberty, adolescence, and young adulthood are times of enormous change in every conceivable way—physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. Teenagers are seekers and questioners by their very nature, and the adults they know best seem never to have the answers that will satisfy them. The influence of her peers can lead a young person to seek baptism or confirmation—or reject them—or a teacher or adult friend can be the catalyst. These are the years when we adults often have

to rely on each other in our Christian community to teach and lead and welcome each other's children: you may be able, if I cannot, to approach the mystery of the growing spirit in my child's precious young life. In the stormy time between childhood and full adulthood, the claims of faith are often etched with lightning if they are accepted at all. If you and your faith survived the journey after baptism as a young person, you probably have a strength and insight that the Church needs desperately in the Twenty-first Century. Past age ten or so, deciding to be baptized is one's own response to God's call; but young people need loving sponsors to help them understand their response. Baptism truly makes one Christ's own forever—it's a conscious "yes" to the God who will never let go.

The conscious "yes" is at the heart of what many of our neighbors call "believer's baptism." Were you twenty-five or older when you were baptized? It took courage, I expect, at least in the sense that folks tend to ask impossible questions like "Why were you never baptized till now?" But adult baptism is a powerful witness in the world—and surprisingly powerful to us in the Church, as well. Infant baptism declares that our relationship with God is initiated not by us, but by God; we know that no "magical" words or actions of ours can make God do anything God does not intend to do. And adult baptism declares just as strongly that we are responsible, both individually and communally, for how that relationship grows.

Jesus was God's Son from before the beginning, but he was thirty years old before he took active steps to make that relationship known in the world. His baptism marked the new beginning: the opening of the heavens signaled the birth of a new age in the history of humankind.

And it's an interesting thing: in addition to initiating the whole business, God also gives us, day after day, over and over, new chances to respond, to say "yes," to answer the call much as Jesus did. As a symbol of that, we will renew our baptismal vows together in just a few minutes. And as evidence of God's persistence in calling his Beloved Sons and Daughters, we welcomed at 9:00 this morning the newest deacon in Christ's one holy catholic and apostolic Church, The Reverend Claire Wimbush, who was ordained here just yesterday. She has been called by God in baptism—and never doubt that the three little girls who were baptized today are also called. For Claire, and for some few others, the call is to Holy Orders, to serve God in ministry through the Church. For the rest of us, the ministry of the Baptized is just as serious, just as important, and extends into every imaginable facet of life.

The call of our baptism is not for a day, or a season, but for a lifetime. Vows once taken need constant renewal. Journeys begun must be seen through. The work we are called as Christians to do in the world truly gives life and joy, and it never ends. Picture it. Ponder. And pray.

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