

Sermon for 1/8/12  
Epiphany 1B

Happy Epiphany!

Today is the first Sunday after the Epiphany, which we celebrated Friday night with pizza and ice cream and king's cake, and with singing "We Three Kings of Orient Are," and with blessings that Kent and I offered for different areas of the church and then encouraged participants to take home to bless different parts of their own houses with.

Epiphany is this special season of the year, where we move from the birth of Jesus as Christmas right past his childhood into his adult ministry, into the vocation that God had sent him into the world for through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And so it's appropriate today that we also celebrate on the first Sunday after Epiphany the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ. We remember today, as our Gospel reading just reminded us, of Jesus' own baptism by John the Baptist—or as the NRSV translation says, "John the baptizer,"—a nice reminder that there weren't Baptists or Catholics or even Episcopalians around in Jesus' time. There weren't even Christians. And yet Jesus' baptism today reminds us as followers of Jesus Christ who are Christians, that through our own baptisms we have been reborn with Christ and given new life through the Holy Spirit to pass on the work and love of God that has been given to us and to others.

As we remember Jesus' baptism today, I wonder, do you remember your own baptism?

If you were baptized as an infant, chances are you probably don't. Though you probably do remember the baptism of your child or children or grandchildren, or maybe of a friend or family member's children, if you served as a godparent. If you were baptized as an older child or an adult, you probably remember a bit more of the personal experience. At least I hope you do.

Perhaps you recall the anxiety of having to come up forward in front of everyone. Surrounded by your close family and friends, and wearing your Sunday best, which you knew nonetheless was probably going to get a little wet. If you were a parent, you probably remember being worried about how your child would react. If you were an adult you probably remember being worried about your hair getting messed up.

You most likely remember waiting. "Is this going to happen or not?" "How much is that priest going to say before I actually get the water on me?" "Oh no, I was supposed to say something there?" "Um, I will, with God's help."

Or maybe you remember the sensations: the sound of the voices and singing and the water being poured into the font; the sun streaming through the windows and your reflection in the water; the wet feel of the water as it streamed down your forehead; the taste of the water in your mouth or the smell of the oil as you were sealed as Christ's own forever.

Perhaps you remember the questions (BCP pg. 302) that always strike me in a baptism: "Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?...the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?...all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?"

I'll be honest. I don't often talk about Satan and the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God in my sermons. For better or for worse, I prefer to focus my preaching energies on the love of God, and the example of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit, and indeed our own work as Christians in passing on each of these things to the world around us. But on a day like today, when we celebrate Christ's baptism and indeed our own as well, it's worth remembering those things we're asked to renounce and affirm at our own and others' baptisms.

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How often do we think about Satan, or the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God, or the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, and even more than those, all the sinful desires that draw each one of us—more than likely on a daily if not momentary basis—away from the love of God?

After these questions, we're asked to respond to others that may seem odd to us as Episcopalians. "Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior? Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love? Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?"

These remind me of the "Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" question I've been accosted with before on the street corner by an evangelical Christian trying to save me. And yet we're reminded today that not only are these questions part of our baptismal service, but that the answer is a bold "Yes." We *have* turned to Jesus, accepted him as our Savior, put our whole trust in his grace and love, and promised to follow and obey him as our Lord. We *have* been saved, by grace through faith, buried with Christ, and reborn to new life in the family of God.

The baptismal service continues by asking all those who witness these vows to do all in their power to support those being baptized in their new life in Christ. This is where we come in today, and every day. As members of Trinity and baptized Christians ourselves, who will soon witness and support the four persons being baptized today, we each have a role to play.

Along with those committing themselves to Christ through baptism in just a few minutes, we are invited to renew our own baptismal covenant. To affirm our belief in God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son of God, and God the Holy Spirit. To affirm that with God's help we will continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers—by continuing to come together here on a regular basis for worship. To affirm that with God's help we will persevere in resisting evil, and whenever we fall into sin, that we will repent and return to the Lord—as we do in our confession. To affirm that with God's help we will proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ—by passing on the love and mercy and forgiveness and peace that we have received from God and others. To affirm that with God's help we will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves—by not neglecting or ignoring the needs of others but by acting out of selfless love help and treat others as we would want to be helped and treated. And finally to affirm that with God's help we will strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being—by practicing justice and peace in our own lives and through our work and interactions with others with whom we share this city, this state, this nation, and this world.

In these words we remember and renew our own baptism, our own membership into the family of Christ and of God. Into the ministry of the church. Yes, we have bishops and priests and deacons, but the majority of the work of the church is done by the laity, by the people in the pews. Through our baptism we have all become workers alongside Christ in his kingdom. We have all been born into new life and sent out to do the work that God calls us to do: to love and serve the Lord with gladness and singleness of heart. Spreading the gospel and God's love to everyone we meet.

Jesus at his own baptism received the Holy Spirit of God, not to enjoy privately its spiritual benefits but in order to pass it on through his ministry and service. Our job as parents and godparents and fellow parishioners in this community—indeed, as baptized Christians who have similarly received the Holy Spirit at our own baptism—is to likewise pass it on to others.

May you be empowered this day through the remembrance of Jesus' baptism, your own baptism, and the baptisms we celebrate here today, to go out into the world in peace to love and serve the Lord by passing on the power of the Holy Spirit which you have received.

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