

Message Delivered at Christ Church
Sunday, January 10, 2010—Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord
TEXTS: II Corinthians 5:16-20; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

A long time ago, a Jewish Rabbi awoke from a good night's sleep, and went for his morning walk. He was a man capable of both deep thought and intense connection with God. So it was that while he was out walking, so consumed was he with his prayer that he went off his usual path and instead ended up right in front of a very large Roman fort that, of course, was filled with all sorts of Roman fort stuff.

The sentry caught eye of the old rabbi, and yelled at him: "Who are you? And what are you doing here?" The rabbi stopped, and kind of looked up and around, a bit confused. But he didn't say anything. So the soldier yelled again: "Who are you? And what are you doing here?"

"How much do they pay you?" the rabbi asked. Well, there were a lot of things the soldier expected the rabbi might say or do, but ask how much he got paid wasn't one of them. So rather disarmed, the soldier told him: "300 denarii a year."

The rabbi thought for a moment; ran his fingers through his beard; and then yelled up with a smile "I'll pay you twice that much if you'll stand outside my house and yell those questions at me every morning."

Who are you, and what are you doing here? Two great life questions.

Do you remember James Stockdale? He was a pilot, and one of the most highly decorated officers in the history of the Navy. Not many people knew who he was. So in 1992, when he became Ross Perot's running mate, at the vice-presidential debate that year he began his opening statement with "Who am I? And why am I here? They were meant as a rhetorical tool to acknowledge that he was mostly unknown to the American public, but soon he became the butt of too many late night jokes. He had thick glasses and a military manner of speaking that we easy to caricature. But really...I wonder whether people made fun of him because those two questions...regardless of how they are asked...make us a little bit nervous.

They are such important questions...questions we each ask...yet the answer can be so allusive.

Well, today is the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. It's an annual celebration in the life of the Church. Every year, the weekend after Epiphany, we hear the story of Jesus being baptized. We tell this story every year for two reasons. The first is that this is how the story of Jesus' ministry begins. His ministry begins with his baptism. After this, he goes public. So after Christmas, it makes narrative sense to begin with this story.

But the second reason is so that we can be reminded of our own baptism. You know, every once in a while, when I was a kid my parents would say "Remember the name you carry." It was their way of saying "Remember who you are."

And just because we're all grown up doesn't mean we don't still need reminders. We need reminding because it's not always easy being faithful...and that's not a judgmental statement; it's just true. Being a faithful disciple is not an easy thing to do; we get distracted, or worn down, fall prey to temptation, or get overwhelmed...and so, like Peter, we begin to fall beneath the waves or like the Prodigal Son lose our way, and find ourselves being molded into the world's image rather than the likeness of Christ.

So what we do is come together every weekend to worship the Lord and be reminded of who we follow; of who has set up camp in our souls; and especially, on a day like today, to be reminded of our baptism.

Now it may be that not all of us here today are baptized. And that's okay. We're really glad you're here. What you'll hear for a few minutes this morning is how God's people understand this sacrament.

And there's a good chance that most of us here were baptized when we were little, and can't remember our baptism. I'm one of those people. I was baptized as an infant, so I don't remember my baptism. But there are plenty of things in my life I don't remember that still shaped me. And the most important one is my baptism.

Because in baptism more than anywhere else is where we are reminded of who has claimed us first; and who we are and to whom we belong; and what we're doing here. Baptism is where we are given our identity. Not where we make our identity, but where we receive it. There is where a good and loving Lord says "Who are you? You are my beloved child. I have adopted you. You belong to me; you are marked as mine forever"...which all of us need to be reminded of.

In our baptism, we participate in a life that is beyond ourselves. We do something that the faithful have done from the beginning for the purpose of being made into God's holy people through water and the Spirit. We are set apart, to be a sign of the redemption of the world and to be part of this redemptive work.

Baptism is not just a symbol, but there is something deeply symbolic about it...especially in the baptism of infants. Because literally, the infant is handed over; given over to be held by the person doing the baptism. The child is released, acting out the truth that in baptism, we submit ourselves. We offer ourselves over; we place ourselves in God's hands. For the purpose of receiving a life that is new. It may be, in the words of the old hymn, that we come to the Lord "Just as I am"...and Lord knows, Jesus accepts us just as we are...but Jesus doesn't leave us there; we don't stay there. Instead, what he gives is a rebirth, and makes us brand new—a new creation, as the Apostle says in these words to the Corinthians; given a new life, a new identity; connected forever with the crucified and risen Lord. "Remember," the Apostle Paul writes the Romans, "that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death...therefore we have been buried with him by baptism...so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead...we too might..." And here's where we expect him to say "be raised from the dead." That's the obvious parallel. And it's true...we are raised from the dead. But that's not how he finishes the sentence. He finishes with "that we might walk in newness of life." That's how Paul writes to the Romans about it.

Newness of life. Not just in heaven, but right now. Right here; in our baptism. Not something we struggle for, or attain of our own strength. Just given to us, forever. Good news, everyone...we aren't just given a new year, or new decade. We're given a new life, every day, because of our baptism. No longer claimed by the past, or any evil power, we are claimed by Christ and placed on his path.

And the beauty of this path is that we don't have to make it, because Christ has done that for us. And we don't walk it by ourselves. We walk it together, with one another, bound and fitted together, like stones in the Temple, as St. Peter writes.

It's a truth that everybody wants to belong. I don't know many people who like being lonely. I know people who put a good face on it, but I don't know many people who are truly happy doing this life thing completely by themselves.

Well, God understands that. The Lord never asks us to do it on our own. It's why in baptism God gives us the Spirit, and it's why in baptism God makes us a people. God's people; a royal priesthood; the people God has created, and shapes, and forms; the people who places Christ at the center of our lives, and who listens for what the Lord is saying and doing. A people that stretches through space and time.

You are part of something bigger than what you see here. We are one with our friends in every corner of the globe; and we are one with the billions of faithful of all colors and races who have gone before us, including our own Libby who we remember tomorrow. With them, we are the ones who claim the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit...not as abstract ideas, but as real-life truths that we experience and manifest.

We're a people, so we're in this through thick and thin. Baptism and the people of God go together. It's always been that way. So that what the people of God who have gone before us said to us in our baptism is this: "You need never think of yourself as being 'on your own.' Together we belong to God. And we will ask of one another our best, and forgive one another when we fall short, simply because that's what Jesus asks of us, and that's how Jesus treats us. The world will tell you many different things. But that is who you are. And it doesn't depend on whether you feel it or not. It's one more of those things that is just an 'is.'"

We're not doing a baptism at this service. We're doing them at all the other services this weekend. But do you know that part in the baptism service where we ask "Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?" And we all respond with gusto, "We will!"?

Well, there's a story told by a pastor named John Carr who once did a baptism of a baby during one of his church's worship services. And at the end of the service, this seven year old kid started sort of swaggering up to the front of the church and looking around and said to him, "Where's this baby that belongs to me now? If I'm supposed to look out for him, I've got to know exactly what he looks like."

That's how it works. That's part of what we receive and offer in baptism. Most of us aren't seven. But we can still look around, pay attention to the faces, and we'll know exactly what those persons we are to look out for look like.

It's said that Martin Luther—when doubts entered his soul, and he became afraid—would touch his forehead...that same place where we make the mark...and say some very simple words "I am baptized." And thus he reminded himself of who he was, and to whom he belonged.

I don't know what your New Year's Resolution is, but if you're still looking for one, consider that. A touch of the forehead a few times each day, and the simple prayer "I am baptized." Try it, and see if it doesn't end up revealing the newness of life God promises, and that we seek. It is the equivalent of a Roman soldier standing outside our front door every morning reminding us that our answer matters. But it is also a reminder of the answer we both seek, and have received.

Who are we? We are the washed, the claimed, the anointed, the redeemed, the empowered, the adopted, the called. We are the people of God...gathered together and then sent; given strength not by our own might or power, but by the Spirit of God.

What are we doing here? We're walking the walk together, step-by-step, and holding hands when we cross the street. We're being God's people; forgiving; sharing; serving; and revealing the grace God has shown us in the grace we show one another. And every day, discovering more of what it means to proclaim that we are marked as Christ's own forever.

Where do we get our answer to these questions? Not in the promises of politicians; not in the enticements of the advertisers; not in the advice from the self-help gurus; and not in the conceit of our own hearts. We get the answers from the one we follow and who, himself, was baptized.

So now, let's remind ourselves...