

St. James, Cartersville
January 12, 2020
1st Sunday after Epiphany, The Baptism of our Lord (A)
A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

Matthew 3:13-17

And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”¹

There’s an old story of the 19th-century British scientist Thomas Huxley, who got off a train one day at a station in Dublin, Ireland. He was late for an important meeting of a scholarly society. Jumping into the nearest horse-drawn cab, he ordered the coachman, “Drive fast!”

With a crack of the whip, the horse was off and running, pulling the cab at a furious pace. Huxley yelled out to the driver: “Do you know where you’re going?”

The coachman answered with a grin: “Noooo, I don’t know where we’re a-going, but I’m driving very fast.”²

That’s a pretty accurate picture of the way many of us live out the days and nights of our lives. We appear to have an overwhelming need to go and not stop.

The people of the faith community I serve like going, doing, serving and giving. Our people like to be active. After all, what should we expect? In the history of human kind, ours is the most active and mobile society that has ever existed. Never before has there been a culture and people who have so much going on in their lives. For most of us, it’s all we can do just to keep up – or – or to keep from falling too far behind. Often we follow illusive schedules; schedules we have adopted without ever giving the slightest thought. Who makes these schedules? Why do we follow them?

Yet, there comes a time to do the opposite of going, doing, serving, and giving. There is a time to stop and focus upon the essentials of life – particularly the spiritual parts of our lives.

There is the story of a parish priest who had a very bright young candidate for confirmation whom we will call Albert – or Al. While Al was going through his confirmation instruction and learning about the renewal of the baptismal vows that were made for him when he was an infant, he was, as we say, “all in.” Every week he was in class and every Sunday he was with his parents in worship. However, as soon as the bishop came to renew Al’s baptism vows and lay hands upon him at confirmation, Al and his family disappeared. Even the other young people in the class who had gotten

¹ Matthew 3:17, *NSRV*.

² https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93041226. Accessed 1/11/2020.

to know Al wondered what had happened. They wondered if something bad had occurred.

Rightly so, the parish priest paid a call upon Al and his parents at their home one evening. When Al and his parents began to talk with the priest the parents said that they were surprised that their priest was calling and checking. The priest remembered Al's mother saying something like, "We thought that when Al received renewed his baptismal vows and was confirmed confirmation that he was all done." It was as if they thought that with the renewal of baptismal vows and confirmation behind them, they could get on the the next big thing in life. That was when the priest realized that something had gone wrong; that the priest had left out one important point. At no point had the priest communicated to the family that the renewal of baptismal vows and confirmation was a beginning – a start – and not the end. Everyone, including the priest, were so focused upon the next thing on their busy schedules that this important truth had been skipped over.

That's what Jesus' baptism tells us today. For Jesus, his baptism was a beginning, a commissioning of a sort. Today as we commemorate the baptism of Jesus and renew our baptismal vows, it is a time to take a pause – take a knee – and reflect on what this means for us.

Full well and good I know how hard it is to stop, or or even to slow down. Yet, there comes a time to do just that. The baptism of Jesus is a time of reflection; a time to ask who we are; not a time of going and doing. Even more so, this is a time to ask whose we are.

Today we are celebrating and commemorating the event in the lives of Christian people that is one of the two most significant events in the life of the individual Christian and in the life of the Christian community: baptism. The other is Holy Eucharist or Holy Communion. In fact, the second important event, Holy Communion, is only significant when we connect it with our Baptisms.

So here was John the Baptist, literally in the middle of nowhere on the banks of the River Jordan, a place our diocesan pilgrims and I will visit next month. In what was then and still is today a near desert, still Jesus managed to find his cousin John. Against John's better judgement, Jesus asked to receive water baptism from John. This was Jesus' first public surrender to another member of God's community of leaders. Three years later Jesus will surrender again, then to his Father's will and go to the cross. On this day at the Jordan River Jesus surrenders to John and asks to let all who would see that he surrendered himself to John in Baptism.

And who were those who were out in the desert wilderness at the Jordan River to see Jesus? You can be assured that they were not the proper people who had access to the rites and ceremonies of the Jewish temple. No, no these would be the outcasts, people who lived their lives on the margins who largely were invisible to any person of standing: the poor and the laborers of society, some of whom were migrant bedouins,

who had few if any rights. These people from the underbelly of society would be the ones who would hear the word of God spoken from heaven: “This is my beloved Son. In Him I am well pleased.”

These people – people who were considered by the proper and good people of society to be of little or no account at all – were Jesus’ first followers. They were the first people to stop in their tracks and ask who this person is and what he might mean for their lives. Today across the centuries they cry out to us: stop and listen to Him. Stop your going, your doing, your serving, and your giving, and listen to him. Let him change your lives, they say, as he changed our lives.

Out of this mere, meager, and almost missed event at the Jordan River, the community of Jesus’ followers had its beginning. This community, a community of people who were resented and resisted from the very beginning, are our forerunners; forerunners of the faith. This was a very special and different type of community.

Many of you have either read Harper Lee’s book “To Kill A Mockingbird” or seen the movie by the same name. Currently the story has been converted into a stage play that is running on Broadway in New York. This story offers a powerful vision of two vastly different communities, both that were set in the 1930s in Mississippi. One was reflective of the intolerance of the era; a community of people who were known for their fear, bigotry and greed. The story, narrated by lawyer Atticus Finch’s daughter Scout, described another very contrasting community. This other community, much encouraged by Atticus Finch, was known for its people of tolerance, love and bravery. Though Harper Lee didn’t say it in her book, this is likely a community that we would say was known for what we call Christian virtues. “To Kill A Mockingbird” is a story of these two communities who were on a collision course.³

The commemoration of Jesus’ baptism and the renewal of our baptismal vows this morning pushes us to press the pause button of life and reflect. To which of these communities of life do we belong? To which community do we want to belong?

And one more thing needs to be said, this time to those who today will step forth to publicly through either Confirmation or Reception renew your baptismal vows. Neither God nor I are interested in what you THINK about these vows. Our interest is upon where your hearts are. My experience is that people can tell me what they think and then move on to the next big thing in their lives. To speak words from your heart puts you in a different place.

Through words spoken over 50 years ago the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. moved us back into a language of the heart. Often we are reminded of that central statement he made in what probably was his most memorable speech, “I have a

³ http://www.bookrags.com/studyguide-tokillmockingbird/?gclid=EAlaIQobChMlu6P8vMr85glVENTkCh3xwgE4EAMYASAAEgJ9CfD_BwE#gsc.tab=0. Accessed 1/11/2020.

dream.” As someone once told me, Doctor King didn’t say that he had a strategic plan. Strategic plans come and go. The Reverend Doctor King said that he had a dream. I wonder how parallel his dream was with the visionary dream Jesus had when he came out of the water of the Jordan River that day and heard the voice of his Father name him as his “...beloved Son?”

As members of the St. James Christian community, I pray that God will give you dreams not just about what you are to do, but much more importantly, about who you are.

Brothers and sisters, you are children of the living God. You are members of the beloved community of Jesus Christ. Alleluia.

AMEN.