

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Epiphany 1-A; 8 January 2017
Epiphany Seattle
Preacher: The Rev. Todd Foster
(rev. 201701062207)

In nomine...

I. John's Baptism

A year ago this month I went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. If you ever have the opportunity to visit the place where Jesus lived, I encourage you to do so. You'll never listen to the lessons at church with the same ears again! Instead you will see the places, the landscapes, the people, you'll hear the sounds and you'll smell the scents carried by the breezes. You'll relate to the Bible on a whole different level.

During one of our full and rich days in the Holy Land, our group made the trek out from Bethlehem to the Jordan River. The Jordan flows out of the Sea of Galilee, down through the countryside, and empties into the Dead Sea below Jericho. It was cold that January day in 2016 on the plains outside of Jericho. But who can resist going to the place where Jesus was baptized, and dipping a foot or hand in the water? I brought back a sample of the water with me: how amazing to touch the water that played such an important part in Jesus' life!

As I stood there at the Jordan, I called to mind an image of a Palestinian man named John, dressed in animal skins and proclaiming a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins. I imagined the crowds gathered around him. Yes, there were some Pharisees and priests there, checking out this interloper who drew people away from the synagogue and the Temple. But how many *more* people were there out of a genuine hunger for God?! People came to John the Baptist, listened to his invitations to live differently, confessed their sins, and were baptized here in this river!

John offered to his hearers a chance to start over. Where they feared they had messed up, where the Pharisees and priests told the people they weren't careful enough about the law, weren't pure enough, hadn't offered the right sacrifices, *weren't good enough* – John told them it was OK. The past was past and the future was wide open for a different kind of life. John's listeners might have thought they had broken off relationship with God, but God had never given up hope on them. It wasn't too late for them to repair their relationships with God, with each other, and with themselves.

II. Jesus's Baptism

And among this motley group of refugees from organized religion, who do you think showed up one day? It was Jesus! I don't think anybody was more surprised than John the Baptist!

"What are *you* doing here?" John asked. John knew Jesus: they belonged to the same extended family and their mothers were especially close. John knew Jesus' reputation as smart, knowledgeable about the law, holding court in both the synagogue in Nazareth and the Temple in Jerusalem, amazing all the teachers with his own questions and answers about their law. Jesus was the smartest, kindest, purest, most moral, most just, most virtuous person that John knew. John asked Jesus, "What do you *mean* 'baptize you?' What sin have *you* committed? What need have *you* to repent and change your life? Who is closer to God than *you* are?"

But Jesus just said, "It's alright, John. It is good and right for us to do this." Jesus knew what he was doing. Jesus, in all his amazing humility, was making a choice. Jesus, the son of God; Jesus, the King of Israel; Jesus, who could find ready welcome in the debates of the rabbis or the discussions of the priests; Jesus had found *these* were *his people* who gathered around John to confess their sins and to be baptized. When Jesus looked around to see where God was at work, he found this was the place. God was changing lives, forgiving sins, healing broken hearts. As God in the flesh, Jesus knew this was *his* mission. Jesus could stand in solidarity with all the most despised deplorables of his day – the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the lepers, the foreigners, even the Roman soldiers! – because it was precisely among these, these who were poor in spirit, these who were not too proud to know their need, these who were ready for a change, it was among these that the Kingdom of God was coming in all its power and beauty.

And so John, a little confused, a bit befuddled, took Jesus at his word and did for him what he asked. But all the time he was baptizing Jesus, I'm sure John had a questioning look in his eye. John's questions were answered as soon as Jesus came up out of the water. The heavens opened up, the Spirit of God descended like a dove, and a voice from heaven said, "Jesus: you nailed it! You didn't screw that up!" (That's my own translation from the Greek.)

III. Christian Baptism

And that's what happened. John was very much a prophet in the classical sense, taking ideas about God that had grown too stale, too institutionalized, too remote from ordinary, real people with ordinary, real, complicated lives, and he had broken those ideas open and brought them back to the people. John was laying the groundwork for the mission of God to be carried out by the Messiah. And that whole mission of God can be summed up in baptism.

Baptism is about forgiveness, it's about standing in the presence of God, taking the ugly parts of your life and holding them up to the light and saying, "Hmmm... what are we going to do about this?" Baptism is about realizing it's never too late, you've never moved too far from God, nothing is unforgivable. Jesus healed people where no cure could possibly be expected. Jesus created possibility and connection where, according to the world's judgement, there had been only brokenness and alienation. Jesus reminded people of this fundamental truth of reality: You (_____....) are the object of God's delight.

We claim that same truth in advance for our children when we baptize them, covenanting to raise them with the same gifts and responsibilities to which we have bound ourselves: to love God, to love neighbor, and to know themselves first and foremost as objects of God's delight.

Once you have been baptized into Christ, you, like Jesus, have come to a turning point in your life. You, too, are on a mission from God. The mission you and I share is precisely that mission of Christ: to bind up the broken hearted, to heal the sick, and to proclaim forgiveness. The healing that God conveys through me may look different from the healing God conveys through you, and likely as not neither of us might not ever witness acts of healing exactly like what Jesus did. But just because I don't walk around giving sight to people who were born blind, that doesn't mean I can't be faithful to the ways God *does* choose to act through me, and convey God's power in a kind word, a quiet presence, a gentle touch, or a warm embrace.

Today we will recount our baptismal covenant. We will remember the promises we have made. We will consider how baptism shapes our lives: the privileges, responsibilities, and opportunities it affords us.

If you have not been baptized, what's holding you back?

If you have been, how's that working out for you?

And wherever you are on your spiritual journey, where do we go from here?

Questions:

1. What is meant by the metaphor of baptism as death and resurrection?
2. How is God at work in your life right now?
3. What event or events in your life really define who you are?