

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
Epiphany 1-A; 12 January 2020  
St. Thomas', Glassboro – Todd Foster  
(rev. 202001111601)

## The Baptism of Our Lord

*In nomine...*

### **I. Beginning: Once upon a time...**

Today is one of the four days set aside in the church year as especially appropriate for baptisms. It's not that it's bad to baptize on other days – but it's especially good to baptize on these days.

One of the reasons it's good is because it makes it easy to celebrate your baptismal anniversary. I was baptized on 20 April 1983. I can only tell you that because I have it written down along with my other vital stat's and I went to look it up while I was preparing this homily! On the other hand, my son Elisha was baptized on All Saints'. It's easy to remember and he shares it with an awful lot of people.

Another reason it's good to baptize on these days is because we remember with, and join with, important events in the history of our salvation. We baptize on Christmas and Pentecost. And on the Baptism of our Lord.

Now as Episcopalians, we tend to baptize a lot of babies. Our baptismal liturgy is intended primarily for the baptism of adults, but it allows for babies, too. So we baptize our babies and claim them for Christ before they are able to make their own decisions. This is good and right, just as surely as we name them, dress them, feed them, vaccinate them and educate them. Baptizing them, and leading them into the life of the baptized, is probably the single best gift we could offer our children.

And, babies are cute. So we get all sentimental and teary-eyed when we think of baptizing, because we think of the little babies. Sometimes they cry, sometimes they laugh, and sometimes, if they're a little older like Noah Golden, they delight in helping with the asperges and reminding everyone of their own baptisms!

## **II. Middle: Tension: destabilizing**

This is why it makes me laugh that we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord right after Christmas. As if we were baptizing the baby Jesus. But Jesus wasn't a baby when he was baptized. And his wasn't a "Christian" baptism! It was John's baptism of repentance. But that rubs us the wrong way. So preachers ever since the day of Matthew the evangelist have been asking: if Jesus was without sin, why was he baptized? Even John the Baptist was taken aback: as if by coming to him for baptism, Jesus was assigning to John an importance that John could not own.

### **IIa. Jesus baptism is not for John's sake**

But Jesus assures John this is the right thing to do. Jesus witnessed a community coming to John in order to be consecrated to God, to commit itself to participation in the work of God. Remember how John chastised the Pharisees and Sadducees who came for repentance, warning them that baptism would avail them nothing if it did not issue forth in changed lives, bearing good fruit.

Jesus saw in baptism an opportunity to embrace and to acknowledge the work of God in Jesus. It was a way for Jesus publicly to embrace God's invitation and to align himself with God's mission. Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph and Mary, was baptized to express his own commitment to the reign of God in his life.

### **IIb. Isaiah**

And what does the reign of God look like in a person's life? We have a beautiful description of it in our first reading today, from Isaiah. I invite you to look it up again when you get home! Isaiah begins with the words of God, "Here is my servant, in whom my soul delights: I have put my spirit upon him." Do you hear the parallels to today's Gospel? Isaiah goes on to explain what the results of God's putting God's spirit on God's servant will be. In a word, the result will be "justice."

Three times Isaiah uses the term: justice, justice, justice. And all the words in between simply describe what justice is, what justice looks like, and for whom is that justice. Justice will be for everyone, for all the nations – not just Isaiah's co-religionists. Justice will care for the weak, the tender, the vulnerable. Justice will open the eyes of the blind. Justice will free prisoners. Justice will not delay or be discouraged. Justice will come in strength and without fail because it

reflects, here in Epiphany we should say it *manifests*, is an epiphany of, the very nature of the Lord God. Justice is closely associated with God's own personal name and glory and praise.

If one bears the spirit of God, justice will be the clear and obvious result.

### **IIc. Jesus & the Spirit of God**

So, to go back to Jesus and his own baptism: Jesus was a member of a community – and every community has its blind spots and its sins. Every community discriminates against certain groups (the ones we refer to as “them” or “not us” or even as “enemies”). And every community fails in some measure to care for even the disadvantaged among it. Every society will take advantage of its poor. In baptism Jesus was engaging in corporate repentance for the sins of the society in which he lived.

In baptism Jesus was embracing the mission to which God was calling him, a mission of justice.

In baptism Jesus confessed his commitment to God and to God's purposes: and Jesus was answered with God's spirit appearing in the form of a dove. Jesus was answered with an exclamation of God's pleasure, God's love, God's delight.

### **III. End: Now / not yet; Because God... therefore...**

Today as we remember the baptism of Jesus, we remember our own baptisms. When were you baptized? Why were you baptized? What has been the fruit of your baptism?

While as a church we welcome everyone, we acknowledge that we are primarily a gathering of the Baptized. The canons of the Episcopal Church stipulate that you become a member of a parish by having your baptism date written in our parish register. It is that baptism that marks you as belonging to Christ and those who belong to Christ are the constituent members of Christ's church.

But that baptism is not primarily a membership card. It's not something you do for the benefit of an institution or for the benefit of the clergy. Baptism is about growing, being changed, becoming.

The baptized are residents of the Kingdom of God, enacting the Kingdom of God right in the midst of our daily lives. Baptism, genuinely embraced, is going to lead you into some uncomfortable situations and lead you to do some things that the people around you might think don't quite make sense. Like spending a weekend supporting the Kitchen of Hope food distribution, or inviting homeless families to sleep in our parish hall through Family Promise. In your daily life caring for the vulnerable, the weak, the blind, the imprisoned and trapped. We do these things not in order to win God's approval, but in order to encounter God. Like baptism, they are the visible and outward signs of the invisible and inward things that God is doing. That makes them all sacramental in nature. Like baptism.

Baptism is a sign of your embrace of God's invitation to mission. Baptism becomes visible and vital as it issues forth in justice.

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