

Sermon, 7 January 2007—First Sunday after Epiphany
The Baptism of our Lord

Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 89:1-29; Acts 10:34-8; Luke 3:15-6, 21-2

Our primary response to the Good News today lies, not in a sermon, but in our renewal of our Baptismal Covenant. We are doing this on the day that we remember Jesus' own baptism. It seems only two days ago we knew him as an infant, who attracted local and foreign attention through a series of miraculous celestial events. Even proud grandparents could not have made up some of the claims that attached themselves to this child. Then came silence—thirty years of silence—except for one crowded bustling moment in Jerusalem when he was twelve years old and gave his parents the slip so he could spend more time in the Temple talking to the teachers of the Law, eager in his own way to confirm his commitment to his faith, as our confirmands also are in theirs. The next time we notice him, he is stepping forward out of the crowd to undergo what we believe he has no need to undergo. He has heard the preaching of his cousin John and, along with many others, walks into the Jordan for this rite of purification.

Now, it is worthwhile to reflect a moment on the historical possibility here. We know that the Gospels exist not to convey the objective data about Jesus' life. They are not police reports, nor transcripts of recordings, nor descriptions of livecam websites. They were written after the principal fact of our faith broke in: after Jesus' Resurrection, when his meaning and his identity started to burn clear. They were written after the pragmatic realities of our faith hit home: after the fall of Jerusalem and the persecution of Nero, when Jesus' followers started to realize that the principal witnesses of Jesus' life were dying and that Jesus himself had not yet returned as he promised. They were written to convey with urgency and conviction and gratitude who

our older brothers and sisters knew Jesus to be. What was essential to remember about Jesus? What was life-transforming to believe about him?

Let me make sure that you understand that we do not want objective accounts of Jesus' life. Our age has a bias towards the objective, the unbiased, the so-called scientific, the disinterested, because we are children of the Enlightenment, and we don't want anyone telling us what to think. We have come of age, and the dignity of the human person, expressed in the autonomy of our reason, is our trumpet call—or perhaps I should say our siren song, or even our swan song. However, in the case of the story of Jesus, when we are faced with the possibility of a transformed life, it will do us no good to hear from people who can give us the statistics, but who remain unmoved and unchanged, who somehow miss the generator and the electricity of Jesus' presence among us. The person I want to hear from is the person who says, “now I see what is worth living for, now I understand how to live, now I am freed from the anxieties and insecurities and shames that used to cripple and silence me, now I no longer fear death, now I know this can be true for you as well, because it is not something I did, but something I found.” That's worth hearing more about directly from the believer's mouth. So these Gospel writers wrote with urgency and conviction and gratitude to proclaim God-with-us for our salvation.

If that is true, then two very odd things hit us immediately. Why would they show Jesus submitting to the teachings and practices of another person? Why would they tell us he underwent a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? At these points, when you read Scripture, dear friends, pick up and handle that sturdy tempered tool—one of those German precision instruments—with which scholars probe fleshy exhortative texts for their bone and sinew of fact: “the more difficult reading is probably the

more authentic.” Jesus’ followers would not have made up what seems unlikely or unflattering about Jesus, so what appears discordant and surprising must have a basis in fact. Not only that, Jesus’ baptism by John the Baptizer is unequivocally affirmed in all four Gospels—and John the Evangelist rarely coincides with the other three. So our ancestors in faith passed this story on, because it actually happened, and everyone knew it.

So let’s consider this young man standing at the edge of the Jordan. What if we have in him a passionate and devout Jew, drawn to spiritual fervor, eager to evolve his ritual practices into a pervasive way of life? What if he is convinced, because of his love of God, welling up from who knows what source, that none of us, and particularly not him, have ever given ourselves to God fully enough? What if he hears in John precisely what he most believes: it is one thing to be dunked in water, but another thing entirely to sink into the refining fire of the Spirit’s whirlwind? Wouldn’t it be possible that the unbuffered fearless person that strides through the Gospels is exactly who the young man from Nazareth, standing on the banks of the Jordan, hoped he might become, if he could only pass through John’s baptismal waters as if he were crossing to a Promised Land?

I believe that if we can glimpse him there, we see, not a divine figure, who acts to show he identifies with us, but a human figure, whom we act to identify with. The human Jesus evokes a human response. God willing all of us have a spark the Holy Spirit can blow into flame. God willing all of us notice we walk past the font every Sunday and sense the remote spray of the roaring cataract of God’s power, so that we wonder whom we might become if we recalled the waters of baptism as our burial and rose a new person. This Jesus, eager for God’s revelation of the one more powerful than that river preacher, eager to remove barriers and fears, eager to radicate himself

deeply and irrevocably in what gives life, this Jesus, I think, got the attention of those around him, who found him worth following and trusting.

The stories are also uniform in agreeing that the knowledge of Jesus as the Son of God blazes up at his baptism. For Mark, Jesus comes to know this himself; for Matthew and John, others come to know it about him. What Jesus hoped for, as he waited in line to be pushed under that muddy current, he was fully in possession of when he rose up from the water. There was no barrier between him and God any more—only love, a particularly intimate and trusting love: the affection between a parent and a child who know that all they have is theirs in common, though one is the source of all and the other is the restoration of all, one gives and the other gives back; and in this exchange, which they long to bring us into, their joy is increased beyond any ability to calculate.

Now, I have said that the story of Jesus' baptism is unlikely and unflattering to one the church is proclaiming as the Son of God. Luke, particularly, is uneasy about it, anxious to present the most compelling account possible to Gentile readers, who prize personal dignity, prestige, and position befitting patronage. Jesus' dalliance with a fanatic and his practices will be a hard sell. So Luke tells the story in a striking way: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove." Notice that the Baptizer is not depicted anywhere in Luke as actually baptizing Jesus. Notice that Jesus and the crowd are mentioned separately. And notice most of all that everything in this sentence except for one thing happens in the passive voice; we observe all those *to whom* things are done, and only who does, who acts: "the Holy Spirit descended." Here, according to Luke, is the only actor in this scene.

God acts at baptism, and the Spirit empowers the ministry about to begin. From the beginning, when God creates, the Spirit rushes over Creation.

For Luke, this is vital, because again when he opens his second volume of the salvation history, the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit will again descend and ignite all the ministry that burns through all the remaining narrative. So it is, he wants us to understand, with us, if we could only see. It is God who acts; it is the Spirit who empowers. No different Spirit acted in Jesus' baptism than acted in yours. And the power given to you is provided so that you can live out the Covenant into which you entered at your baptism.

So as we stand in a few moments, and renew our Baptismal Covenant, and as we commit our new confirmands to their journey in Christ, to be confirmed in their faith by the Church, bring to mind that none of these are promises we initiated and none of these are promises that we alone have the power to live out. God provides us with everything we need to become what God has called us to be. God so prizes his Creation that God wants it to flourish, to rejoice in itself as Creation and in God as Creator, and to achieve that union of heaven and earth, of divinity and humanity, which the life of Christ and the power of Christ makes possible for us. You are not asked to find it in yourself to resist evil, but to find God's overcoming of evil and death already at work in yourself. You are not asked to seek and serve Christ in all persons out of your own sense of what can be done, but to gird yourself in a servant's towel and kneel next to Christ, who is already washing the feet of those he loves. You are not asked to sift and bleach and strain your love, always clotted with self-interest, into some thin cool broth of justice and peace and respect for the dignity of others, but to remain alert for the light and speed of the Spirit's affection for all that is, that heat and

stirring in your depth because you are the Creation over which the Spirit sweeps, to wake you up, to give you shape, to drive you forward into the New Creation, and when you sense that incandescence, welcome it, share it, and let it overflow.

Then the Spirit, working in you, will do more than you can ask or imagine, and you will know the truth of God's voice from heaven, "this is my beloved daughter, and this my beloved son, who know how much pleasure I have in them, and who know my pleasure with all that is." On that day, your praise of God will be no duty, but ease and joy, and you will know the truth of your voice from earth, saying, "this is my beloved God, in who everything that has ever pleased me is found"—the same God, Eternal Source, Only-begotten Word, and Life-giving Spirit, whom we praise today.