

Year B, Baptism of the Lord, January 10, 2021

✚ Last Sunday, as we marked the Feast of Epiphany, I spoke in my sermon about we the Church being the place where the love and ministry of Jesus is lived out in a hurting world. I said, we reveal God's presence through our lives, our acts of compassion, love and forgiveness, in our humility and our vulnerability and in the power of God manifested in each one of us by the very Holy Spirit of God.

✚ Today, as we hear the story of Jesus' baptism, I want to reflect a bit more deeply on how we, the Church, do all of this. I want to talk about our unique calling by God to serve this world in the love and power of God. In other words, I

want to talk about the meaning of our own baptism.

✚ Let's begin with scripture. John the Baptist seems to have been a very charismatic and powerful character, someone deeply connected with God, who gathered huge crowds around him as he preached to and baptized people in the river. There was nothing new or wrong in what he was doing, except he was unsanctioned by the established Temple clerics. He proclaimed the coming of the one who would save us – the Messiah and he baptized people, helping them ritually wash away their impurity so they were prepared for the Messiah. The Temple folks weren't too fussed about another

Messianic following, but they had a monopoly on purification. Sins were expunged and people made whole through ritual Temple cats, performed by the priests, not by religious nuts in the desert.

✚ So, John is walking around with a target on his back, but that's okay because his job was simply to get some folks ready to meet the Messiah, and along comes Jesus, who walks into a group of people who are primed to follow him. The baptism stories in the four gospels are all slightly different. The features of Mark's telling are this: 1) ⁴*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* ⁵*And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem*

were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 2. ⁷*He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.* ⁸*I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'* 3. *Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.* 4. ¹⁰*And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.* ¹¹*And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'*

✚ John prepares the way for Jesus, announcing his coming, people are purified in baptism, Jesus is baptized and he has a personal spiritual

encounter with God – a private one. He has this vision of the dove and he hears God’s affirmation of him. I think sometimes we have difficulty with other versions where this is a public vision for all to witness and hear. It sounds too biblical, too unlikely. But Mark describes something that any of us could (and perhaps have) experienced: a very real sense of God’s Spirit filling us and of God’s love for us.

✚ That is what I want to stick with this morning. This personal experience of God that Jesus has at his baptism, and that many (if not all of us) have experienced at some level at some pivotal moment. It might be as clear as what Mark lays out here, or it might be a simple, gentle warming of the heart and knowing that God’s Spirit is alive and well and dwelling in us.

✚ I want to stick with this, because it is very profound and is the basis from which we live out our mission and ministry as Christians. This is the gift of God’s grace. When each of us were baptized, the Holy Spirit did indeed descend upon us and God did indeed declare to each one of us: “You are my child. I love you and am pleased with you.” You might not have experienced a vision, but it happened. Our baptism restores us into a right relationship with God; a relationship in which we are connected by bonds of family to the godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (That is, we become siblings of Jesus); and a relationship in which we are connected by the will and purpose of God to the eternal creating, restoring, transforming and loving work of God.

✚ In baptism, we get the whole package and it is up to us to use it or not. If you look at our baptismal vows, they spell out in a bit more detail, the responsibilities of being part of this family and what it means to be connected to the will and purpose of God. It means becoming part of this community and sharing in its life; it means resisting evil (that which is not of God's will) and always returning to this community, restored by God; it means proclaiming our identity by how we live our lives, as we share good news by word and example; it means viewing every single other human being (even the vilest of us) with love – seeking out and serving Christ who dwells in them; it means working hard and probably sacrificially to achieve justice and peace in the world as we

honour the dignity and as we respect every other human being; and finally it means loving all of God's creation itself and working sacrificially to protect it and nurture it.

✚ This is not trivial stuff. It is about being a part of the transformation of the whole world from the driver's seat. Of course, as we sit there, we realize it is God who is steering the wheel, Jesus who gets dirty on the floor manipulating the brakes and accelerator and the Holy Spirit powering the engine. But we the body of Christ are in that seat.

✚ But we have questions and doubts. How do we do all of this? What do I have to give up in order to get in the driver's seat? I'm not sure I know how to drive this vehicle or where it's

going? To be a baptized Christian is to struggle with all of this. That's normal. As we learn through the experience of prayer and life, we become more and more comfortable with sitting in the driver's seat and letting go of the worries, doubts and questions; and as we simply accept that the Holy Trinity has it all under control.

✚ I want to end with a passage from 2 Corinthians, where Paul writes: *“Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the*

power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

✚ What Paul realizes is that he doesn't have to be God, or even strong, talented, healthy, happy, depressed, or smart in order to be part of this body and serve Christ. He suffers some affliction or flaw (a thorn, he calls it) that at the very least tempts him to abandon the project and at the most makes him think he can't do it. He doesn't have what it takes. He is far from perfect. So, he asks God to take this thorn away, so he will better be able to serve. But as it turns out, this thorn is perhaps the key to his humility that permits him to simply follow

Christ and trust, because he can't do it by himself. His thorn means he has to rely on God. He realizes that his weakness is his strength. God speaks to him in prayer and basically says: "don't worry about it – I will transform your weakness into perfect power. *My grace is sufficient for you.*"

✚ “*My grace is sufficient for you.*” That is one of the most important lines in all of scripture. As we recall Jesus’ baptism and reflect on our own, remembering that through it, we are called to follow Christ – even to give up everything for the sake of the gospel – perhaps as much as our possessions, our health and our freedom – even our lives; as we recall all of that, we have the assurance, and the epiphany here, is that we have the gift of God’s grace – what else do we

need? What more could we need to live out our calling or simply to live fully? If we have God’s grace and we know that God cares for us eternally, how can we possibly go wrong? What possible excuses can we have?

✚ When that dove descends on Jesus, the Holy Spirit is one with him and the grace of God flows within, around and from him. He has all he needs, the grace of God – and what amazing things he does! That same grace of God is sufficient for us as well. Get to know it in prayer, in action, in the grace others bestow upon you, in the life of your faith community. Learn to trust that grace is sufficient and with the grace of God living out those baptismal vows is a piece of cake.