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Christ Church, Georgetown
January 10, 2021
First Sunday of the Epiphany, Year B
Mark 1:7-11

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is a very old tale about two devout monks who were traveling together on a long journey. As they walked through the thick forest along a winding path, they filled their time discussing how one can tell when a person is truly holy. They both had very different opinions, and as they walked and talked, their path through the woods abruptly ended and they found themselves on the bank of a large rushing river. They could see that the path continued on the other side, but they saw no bridge across the raging waters. One of the monks turned to the other and said, "I will show you true holiness." And with that he slowly and carefully walked across the surface of the water until he reached the other side, where he stood looking very smug and pleased with himself. "That," he yelled across the water to his friend still on the far bank, "is true holiness." Almost immediately, the second monk plunged head first into the swiftly moving water. Struggling and swimming against the current he fought to reach the far shore. After several long minutes of being beaten by the rocks and scraped along the bottom he emerged on the other side bloodied and bruised, covered in mud and soaking wet. Looking at his dry warm friend he said, "No my friend that is true holiness."

This puzzling story illustrates in a profound way the significance of our Gospel reading. Mark tells us this morning about Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. If you remember other Gospel accounts of this story, John is very hesitant to baptize Jesus. In Matthew's Gospel, John says to Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?" John was confused. Why did the Messiah, the son of God, who as John says, "is

mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie," why did he need to be baptized? The Christ was to bring a new baptism, a baptism not by water but by the Holy Spirit. Why did he need the baptism of John? But Jesus insisted, and John did as his master commanded. Mark writes: "And when Jesus came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove."

The reason for Jesus' baptism is directly linked to our Lord's idea of holiness. If we see the raging waters of the river in my illustration as the ups and downs, the joys and sorrows, the successes and failures of human life, then Jesus' idea of what it means to be holy was not that of the first monk. Jesus, the son of the carpenter, the teacher and preacher, did not live a life of aloofness. He was not detached from the ebb and flow of life. He may have walked across the surface of the sea of Galilee, but he did not walk above the river of life. To the contrary, Jesus' ministry is one of immersion into every aspect of human reality. Like the second monk, our Lord dove into life struggling against the current, swimming upstream with the rest of us. He was beaten and scraped by the rocks, muddied and soaked to the bone. Jesus, the man, was born into poverty in a stable in Bethlehem. He was tempted to evil by Satan in the desert. He wept over the death of his friend Lazarus. He felt rage at the money changers in the temple who made a profit off the worship of God. He ate with prostitutes and sinners, the unclean and the outcast. He stayed in the homes of tax collectors. He invited everyone and anyone to follow him and hear God's word. And finally, he allowed human life to kill him. Because our Lord was both fully human and fully God, he knew the heights of divinity and the depths of human suffering.

There is a story Dan Matthews tells about a father who, while driving in a rain storm with his two little girls, passed a small kitten by the side of the road. His girls, once they spotted the

kitten, yelled for their father to stop. He told them he couldn't, the weather was too bad and they needed to get home. "But the kitten may die if we don't stop," the girls answered. The father responded by saying, "There are lots of kittens in trouble and you can't save them all." But the girls persisted, so he stopped the car, backed up and got out to get the kitten. He found it in a puddle, skinny and wet and shivering; and as he reached down to pick it up, the kitten hissed and scratched his hand. The father grabbed it by the scruff of the neck and threw it in the back of the car. The two girls took the kitten home, gave it a bowl of milk, and made a bed for it in a box in the basement. Several days later the father was in the basement when he noticed something rub against his leg. It was the kitten. But instead of scratching this time, she arched her back in a sign of affection. Was this the same cat, the father wondered, who wet and shivering scratched his hand only days before? Yes and no - because the angry and frightened kitten had been transformed by the love and attention given her by the man and his daughters. I imagine that if we could see God's hands, they are probably full of claw marks from his attempts to reach us. Marks made by you and me out of fear, as God attempts to save us from the storm of life.

Jesus' entire life, from his birth to his baptism, through his ministry, and ending in his death, is God's ultimate attempt to reach us. It is God reaching out his hand in love attempting to save us.

William Dubose believed that God could be best found in the imperfections and incompleteness of human life. If we take the humanity of Christ seriously, and if we understand the Epiphany of his baptism, then we need look no further than the day to day struggles of our own lives for God's love and presence. Our Lord is not above us, far off and detached like the monk who stayed clear of the water. God is instead in the midst of us, getting his hand scratched, walking side by side with us, through our joys and sorrows. It is no accident that

many people only come to know the extent and depth of God's love in their moments of greatest pain and suffering. These are the times when we are pulled under by life's current, the times when we often turn to God in desperation. And these are the times when we can be assured that God is with us. There is no place that we have been, no pain that we have known, that Christ has not known before us. There is no place that we will go, no experience that we will have, that Christ has not known ahead of us. That is a fundamental piece of our Lord's Epiphany, and the meaning of his baptism, and it lies at the heart of the Good News. Amen.