

A Sermon by the Rev. John S. McDuffie
The First Sunday After the Epiphany:
the Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ
January 12, 2020

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

One of my great theological explorations and learnings began years ago in my neighborhood barber shop. I went in for a haircut on January 6, which is the feast of the Epiphany. My barber's name was Spiro; he was Greek, and a devout member of the Orthodox Church. For some reason he was always rather gruff with me. As my haircut commenced, I smiled and said to Spiro, "So today, do you celebrate and remember the visit of the wise men to the baby Jesus?" Spiro scowled and reprovably exclaimed, "No! The baptism of Jesus!". Thus concluded our conversation--but it led me to research the origins of the Christian liturgical year.

I found that the Epiphany (which in Greek translates as "manifestation from above") originally was a unitive feast in the earliest Christian Church. Most likely it began in Alexandria, Egypt, where pagans celebrated the winter solstice on January 6, according to the Julian calendar. On that night they celebrated the birth of a god who was virginally conceived. It was also believed that rivers on that night, especially the Nile, had magical properties, including that of transforming their waters into wine. The Christian observance of Epiphany commemorated the manifestation of Jesus as son of God in his baptism; in his first miracle at the wedding of Cana; and to the Gentiles as he was visited in his infancy by wise men from the East. In the Julian calendar, April 6 was the date of Jesus' crucifixion and death, and was also believed to be the date of his conception—hence January 6, nine months later, was the day of his nativity. The Western Church in Rome later adopted the Gregorian calendar. March 25 was the date of Jesus' death and conception; therefore December 25 became the day of his nativity. By the fourth century, the Western Church was observing Christmas Day as we know it on December 25; and the Epiphany on January 6, celebrating the journey of the wise men. The Eastern Church agreed to celebrate December 25 as the feast of Christ's nativity, and January 6 became fully devoted to the baptism of Christ, and the day is called the Theophany—the manifestation of God, fully realized in Jesus' baptism. The Western Church now observes the first Sunday after the Epiphany as the Feast of the baptism of our Lord. So here we are, on one of the holiest celebrations of the year in the Orthodox faith tradition.

Our Gospel lesson today, from Matthew, is my personal favorite of the gospel narratives of Jesus' baptism. As we recall from Advent, John the Baptist was practicing baptism in the Jordan river, as a mark of repentance and amendment of life for the newly baptized. Here I want to say two things about baptism. One is that I think we have lost some of the rich symbolic significance of baptism in our faith tradition. Think of what it would be like to be immersed in a river, drowning to an old life and entering into a new life. There is a story told about the eight year-old son of a Baptist preacher, who decided that he wanted to be like his father, and that he

would baptize the family's two cats. He drew water in the bathtub at home, and quickly took the first cat and submerged her in the water before she knew what was happening. As she ran out of the bathroom, he picked up the second cat—but he had figured out that something unpleasant was going on and began to growl, and hiss, and scratch. The boy had only gotten the top of his head wet when the cat sprang out of his arms and ran to safety. The frustrated boy yelled after the escaping cat, “Oh, go on and be an Episcopalian if it suits you!”

The other point I want to make about baptism, and particularly about Jesus' baptism, is that we shouldn't overly romanticize about the Jordan River, even as we regard it as a sacred place. I recall my colleague Martin Smith some time ago saying that he had just returned from a visit to the Holy Land. The Jordan River looked particularly brown, and sullen, and muddy, and uninviting. That reminds me of another story about a Baptist preacher, who had a question-and-answer advice column in the local newspaper. Someone sent in a thoughtful question: “Do you ever worry about pond scum when you are baptizing?” The preacher's response: “Why no! I'm willing to baptize anybody!”

No more bad jokes from me today. So there is John, baptizing in the Jordan River--and then the adult Jesus shows up one day. He is heretofore unknown to John, if we follow Matthew's narrative track, and he is seeking baptism. Something about this man is immediately arresting to John. “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?” Jesus replies, “Let it be so now—for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

Why was Jesus baptized by John? This is a question that perplexed the theologians of the early Church. If Jesus was perfect, and without sin, why would he need to undergo a baptism of repentance? Much ink was probably spilled over the centuries in dealing with this question—and yet the answer is profoundly simple, I think. Jesus was baptized so that he could give baptism a new dimension of meaning. He didn't need to make amendment for sins; instead, in his baptism the Holy Spirit descended on him and voice was heard saying, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased.” Jesus now knows fully who he is, and what his life's work is about—and those who witness the event are also informed.

What Jesus also shows us in his baptism is that he enters into all areas of human life—including a muddy river, with possible pond scum—and he gives to each area a new dignity and grace. He will be at a joyful wedding, transforming water into wine, and he will also be with Mary and Martha as they mourn the death of their brother Lazarus. He will go out of his mind for us—recall the crucifixion narrative that we will read this year from the gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus cries out in dereliction, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” He will even ultimately descend into hell, as we say in our baptismal creed. No place to which we travel, no pathway that we find ourselves on, will not already have been enclosed by the boundaries of his love. In his book Heart of the World Hans Urs Von Balthasar wrote: “He wanted to sink so low so that in the future all falling would be a falling into him...”

I'm reminded of the words of verse six of the Hymn St. Patrick's Breastplate:

*Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,*

*Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me.
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.*

Our baptism becomes Jesus' baptism; and conversely, Jesus' baptism becomes our baptism. I do not mean, of course, that we become sinless ones like Jesus. More than we like to admit, we will continue to seek our own will instead of God's will, and our lives may become distorted, and we will need to repent and return to God seeking forgiveness. But if we can be called to recollect the words proclaimed at Christ's baptism--"This is my beloved, with whom I am well-pleased"—then we can know that these words are also for us. Christ's incarnation has elevated humanity to an extraordinary place of dignity and grace—and his baptism and our baptisms, have further elevated us.

So this is a great day in the life of the Church. Let us remember our baptisms! And let us know that we have become sons and daughters of God—and let us strive to act accordingly. Amen.