

**Church of the Holy Spirit**  
**I Epiphany            10 January 2016**

Every year on the first Sunday after the Epiphany, we remember and celebrate the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. This is one of those Sundays when it's most appropriate to have baptisms in church. Nevertheless, even without an individual being baptized this morning, we will include in our service the Reaffirmation of Baptismal Vows immediately following the sermon. And we do so, not because of the baptism of Jesus some 2,000 years ago, but because every baptism reminds us of who we are and how we can live our lives now.

All three Synoptic Gospels include similar accounts of Jesus' baptism, and John's Gospel, while not describing the event, records John's response to it. John the Baptist, you recall, preached a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Luke 3:3) Baptism was nothing new to the Hebrew tradition, but it was reserved for those outsiders who had chosen to become converts to Judaism. However, John declared that his baptism was for all, including not just foreign soldiers but also for good Jews. And this baptism had an ethical dimension that began with repentance and the acceptance of God's forgiveness, but also led to "*bearing fruits worthy of repentance.*" (3:8)

This prophetic character known as John the baptizer was not simply an eccentric personality; he was disruptive to the Jewish religion. He went around preaching a message of the need for people of any faith or no faith to repent of their misdeeds and to find forgiveness from God in the waters of the River Jordon. Remember, though, the only place where God's forgiveness could be dispensed in ancient Judaism was only by the official priests and only in the temple in Jerusalem. But in the gospel we learn that "*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.*" Can you imagine how the temple authorities felt about this? A subversive prophet was undermining their monopoly on access to God. He was telling the Jewish people that they (and even non-Jews) could get straight with the Almighty simply by changing their attitudes and their actions, thus causing people to doubt as to the necessity for the services of the temple. No wonder he was arrested and later killed.

Nowhere in the Gospels do we learn why Jesus was baptized. Was he simply identifying himself with the religious renewal orchestrated by John? Since it doesn't seem that Jesus was in need of repairing his relationship with God, it may simply be that he was aligning himself with the spiritual needs of humanity, as well as with John's subversive notion of our direct access to a relationship with a loving, forgiving, father-like God. Whatever the reason for his baptism, the result was a clear affirmation of Jesus' intimate relationship with God, and it became the impetus to begin his public ministry.

Luke's gospel says "*the heaven was opened,*" (an indication that God was acting), "*the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove*" (the Spirit empowering him to begin his ministry), and the voice from heaven declares "*You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*" (acknowledging Jesus as the chosen One, whose coming John had predicted.)

Now it's my understanding that Jesus was not somehow different the moment after his baptism. He remained the same person that he was the day before he came to John. But in the sacrament of baptism, who he is - and what his relationship is to God - are revealed and affirmed. I

frequently try to make this point to parents when they come to have their children baptized. The act of baptism does not change their child's relationship with God; instead, it publicly affirms it. There is no magic trick being performed in baptism. An infant at her baptism is not loved any more by God after her baptism than she was before. No, in baptism we are acknowledging what is: that the one baptized is a beloved child of God, and that we are promising to join God in loving and supporting that individual in the living of his or her life.

The good news that Jesus preached and taught from that day forward was that God has a passionate longing for humanity, for every human being. And that love of God is there for all of us, like that of a father for his children. In fact, according to Jesus, God should be addressed in the most intimate terms, "*Abba, Father,*" which is a child's expression meaning 'daddy or papa' For we, too, are affirmed as "children of God" through our baptism.

Now, I need to be very clear, and some of my evangelical friends might not like this. But to tell the truth, you don't have to be baptized to be a child of God. Every child born, every human being created in the image of God, is God's child, God's son or daughter. Each of us here is God's child in a unique and wonderfully mysterious way, just as Jesus is God's son in a unique and wonderfully mysterious way.

We, in the Episcopal Church, baptize children long before there is any need for them to repent or have any reason to be forgiven. We all know that there will be plenty of opportunities and need for that later in life. But let us be clear that you and I and everyone, are the "*Beloved of God*" no matter what: before we repent or after repentance. In this way, I think that being a Christian is less about what we believe, or even about what we do, and more about who we are: children of God, God's beloved, no matter what - women and men with failings and doubts, but still children and adults whom God loves without condition, and through whom God's Spirit, is still able to provide forgiveness and new life.

A few years back, the world famous golfer Tiger Woods was much in the news, primarily about the dissolution of his marriage, but also about his back problems, both of which seemed to have a negative effect on his golf game. There was much discussion of his indiscretions and the future of the world's most famous golfer on the cable news channels, when one commentator made reference to the role of Woods' Buddhist faith. Here is what he reportedly said: "The extent to which (Woods) can recover seems to me depends on his faith. He is said to be a Buddhist." The analyst when on, "I don't think that faith offers the kind of forgiveness and redemption that is offered by the Christian faith. So my message to Tiger would be, Tiger, turn to the Christian faith and you can make a total recovery and be a great example to the world." Now I think that suggestion was given in all sincerity, and it came out of that man's experience of his own faith, but it clearly showed a lack of understanding of or appreciation for another faith, and it borders on the kind of arrogance, where people almost unthinkingly dismiss other religions while claiming the superiority of their own.

When I was young growing up in West Los Angeles, I never knew anyone who was a Buddhist. I never knowingly met a Hindu, or a Muslim. Some of the youngsters I knew were Jewish, but we rarely talked about our different religions. And if you happen to have been like me, growing up only with Christians, you only knew one way of being, of believing and belonging. But today's

children, I hope, are being raised in a much broader world. In today's world, "our religious lives, if they are being lived at all, are in the context of religious pluralism. But I don't think that's a bad thing – for it means that our children will be aware of all of these other identities. And the diversity around them will no doubt cause them to ask, "Who am I, and how do I relate to others? Do I ignore them? Do I demonize them, or can we live with a sense of equal dignity and mutual respect?"

In Chaim Potok's *The Book of Lights*, the author tells of two Jewish rabbinical students who were visiting Japan and one day were watching a Shinto priest go through his rituals. These two were fascinated, having grown up in the bubble of Orthodox Judaism. The only people they had ever known were other Orthodox Jews. The only faith they thought about was Orthodox Judaism. And, of course, they were going to be rabbis; there was no other path. But as these two rabbinical students watched the Shinto priest, one asked the other, "Is God listening to him, and, if not, why not? And, if so, what are we about?"

Today, each of us will reaffirm our faith by repeating the Baptismal Covenant. But in so doing, their question ought to be ours. If God listens to others from other religious traditions, can we claim some sort of religious superiority? And, if not, what are we about? Hopefully, we are about seeing our world differently, knowing that we are loved and cherished by God, but knowing equally well that so are all those other children of God. And as we respect and honor other spiritual paths, we can live up to the best aspirations of our own.

There are some who will tell us today that we must view our world in the framework of a "clash of civilizations," of Jew vs. Gentile, or a world of Christianity vs. Islam. But I don't think we need to give into such a simplistic definitions or divisions. There are, for sure, extremists in our world. Some of them are Muslim; but some are Jewish, and some are Christian, some armed and riding horseback around the American West. But we shouldn't honor extremists from any faith by giving them the title "Muslim, Jewish, or Christian." We should name them for what they are: extremists and terrorists of all traditions, who belong to only one tradition, the tradition of extremism.

Our task, yours and mine - as Christians, is not to demonize the other or belittle the spirituality of anyone whose faith differs from ours. Instead, we need to seek ways to build bridges between different faiths, to raise children who can honor (rather than fear) people of different backgrounds, and affirm that we are **all** children of God, God's beloved, no matter what.

Some people have commented on the blessing that I use at the end of each service, something I've borrowed from our bishop. But it's admonition to live without fear and it's affirmation that we are loved by God come directly out of the Hebrew scriptures we heard this morning. From Isaiah we heard God saying "*Do not fear...I have called you by name, you are mine...I will be with you...because you are precious in my sight.*"

Knowing that, you and I can pray that, with God's help, we might "*strive for just and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.*" Amen.