

Epiphany I 2009 Year B
January 11, 2009
The Baptism of the Lord
St. Matthew's-Warson Woods

Texts: Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

“I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” Mark 1:8-11

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Today is the first Sunday after Epiphany. Epiphany is a funny little word that has immense and deadly serious life changing implications. The word is Greek and means, appearance or manifestation. It is a time when the Church celebrates God and God’s power breaking into the world in the form of Jesus Christ. It is a time when the Church recognizes that not only have the Old Testament prophecies been fulfilled; they have been fulfilled not just for Israel but also for the entire world.

As is the Church’s custom, the first Sunday after the Epiphany is recognized as celebrating The Baptism of Our Lord; the day when Jesus appeared before his cousin John and was immersed in the Jordan River.

Baptism is a very, very old rite in the Jewish faith. Ritual baths were necessary in order to cleanse an individual from some type of impurity such as touching a dead body or giving birth. Any contact with blood or illness rendered someone impure and they therefore could not approach the temple or make offerings to God until such time as they had been cleansed. Gentiles who converted to Judaism underwent ritual baths after their circumcision. Only then could they participate in Passover and other important celebrations.

But John's baptism was different. John went through the countryside baptizing not to make someone ritually pure but to make someone morally pure and spiritually pure.

John's baptism was not a washing away of the dirt of the body, but a washing away of the dirt of the soul. John preached repentance and baptism as a way to prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

Along comes the Messiah, Jesus. Jesus didn't need John's baptism. Jesus was already morally and spiritually pure. But he takes his place in line with the rest of the people and waits for John to take him in his arms and submerge him in the River. Jesus humbles himself and is baptized by John as a way of showing his humanity and solidarity with the human race. He was also validating and supporting John's ministry and showing his continuity with his Jewish heritage.

This is crucial in Mark's gospel because throughout Mark wants to show that Jesus of Nazareth was not only the fulfillment of the prophets but also the continuing of God's saving work in creation.

John came baptizing with water. Jesus, through the symbolism of water, entered people's lives through the Holy Spirit. What John anticipated, Jesus was fulfilling.

Something really amazing happens as Jesus comes up out of the water. Mark tells us that the heavens are torn open, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus and God's voice is heard saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." What beautiful words. These are the words that all of us long to hear.

In two weeks we will be baptizing Oscar Yanuck. In that service we will be welcoming him into the family of God. We will also be renewing our baptismal covenant; those promises made that bind us to Jesus and to all humanity.

In baptism we are named and we are claimed. We are marked as Christ's own forever and as such, with the power of the Holy Spirit, we are given the strength and power to live a whole new life, a transformed life, a life wherein we strive to grow closer with God and unite our purposes with God's purpose.

In baptism we are given the ability to see the world and ourselves as God sees it and that is no small feat. And we are given the opportunity, which is our life's work really, to meld with God, to let God and God's love so permeate our lives that all we think, all we say and all we do points to God. Epiphany is God's coming down to us; baptism is our rising to meet up with God.

There was a fascinating story on NPR the other day. It seems that scientists at Cornell University have found a species of mosquito that "has mastered the art of the serenade."¹ A mosquito's buzz is technically known as a flight tone. The male mosquito's flight tone is around 600 cycles per second, a female's around 400 cycles per second.

It seems that in selecting a mate, the male mosquito will bring his flight tone to the point where his tone and the female's tone are in perfect pitch together. It is only at the time that they will join to make beautiful mosquito music together.

Think of an orchestra tuning up before a concert. It is fascinating to watch the musicians, usually starting in the violin section, bow up and try to bring all the other musicians in the orchestra to their pitch. In fact, the concert won't start until that happens.

The love we experience in Jesus Christ, the love that came down and manifested itself to humanity, is the "pure love that raises us to the exquisite pitch of God."²

It is this love, this "exquisite pitch" that we are given at baptism. What would our lives be like if we really believed that we were in perfect pitch, an exquisite pitch with God?

What would our lives be like if we lived as if at our baptism the heavens were torn apart like a child ripping open Christmas presents and everyone heard God say, "You are my child, my beloved, with you I am

¹ Christopher Joyce, *Mosquito Duet Leads to Love*. NPR January 9th, 2009
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=99133147>

² Thomas Casey in *Music of Pure Love* (Templegate, 2006) as quoted in *Synthesis*. January 11, 2009.

well pleased.” What would the world be like if we lived as if we believed this?

It did happen at the baptism of Jesus and it does happen for us. God, at every baptism declares his love for us. I have told you this before and I will preach this until I take my last breath, nothing we have done or will do can make God love us less and nothing we have done or will do can make God love us more.

Those beautiful words that all of us long to hear, those beautiful words spoken at Jesus’ baptism, are said to us. You, me, all of humanity are the beloved. How could that possibly be? How can we be so loved that God would tear the heavens apart to tell the world how much we are loved and how pleasing we are to him?

How can we be so loved, especially when we are so unloveable? I don’t know, perhaps because God is God and we most certainly are not. But what I do know is that the point of the life of Jesus Christ is to show us that God loves us as much as his only Son and not one iota less. This is the Good News that Mark proclaims throughout his gospel.

Our problem is that we don’t live like we are the beloved of God. We don’t live as if our lives please God. We don’t live like this and we desperately need to. We need to reclaim this because in reclaiming our heritage as the beloved and in recognizing all humanity as beloved, the very world will change. Our lives and those lives that we touch will be transformed by God’s loving action towards us in the form of Jesus Christ.

There is an Ignatian spiritual that I would like to share with you to carry us through this Epiphany season. Every morning I would like you to start your morning with saying your name and then say “You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.” Take five minutes every morning and evening and just repeat it. At the beginning of Lent which is six weeks from now, I would love to know if anyone who is doing this consistently, twice a day, upon awakening and going to sleep, notices any change in their life.

When we do this, when we reclaim our belovedness, we bring our pitch, our lives, to where our lives and God's life is one. When we do this we become the Epiphany, the manifestation of God to the world.

Now, go out into the world and live as if we truly believe this.

Amen.