

Baptism of the Lord

January 8, 2022

Matthew 3:13-17

This past week, a small group of local pastors – The Catonsville Ministerium – gathered for our sometimes monthly meeting. Instead of our usual agenda of focusing on a topic of interest, or hosting a guest speaker, or simply sharing what’s going on in our churches, we decided that we would engage in a time of Bible study together. The text that was chosen was this week’s text, one of the selected texts from the lectionary: this year it’s the gospel of Matthew, and the story of his account of the baptism of Jesus.

We’d barely gotten started when one of the clergy members asked: what’s the lectionary? We described how the texts are grouped together for each Sunday, in a three year cycle, and go through one of the gospels in that cycle. This year, year A, it’s Matthew. But there’s some stories that come up at the same time each year, we noted. Christmas, of course. Epiphany – last week’s text of the magi who come to worship Jesus. And the Baptism of the Lord...because it’s the beginning of Jesus’ adult ministry.

Well, we started diving into the text. We wondered about John’s reaction to Jesus: why the hesitation and discussion? What did it mean for Jesus to be baptized? Did he need “forgiveness of sin?” We shared some personal stories too: What has been our own experience of being in Israel, and going to the River Jordan to see that location first-hand?

Instead of a twenty-minute start to the gathering, we wound up talking, conversing, sharing for over an hour. The energy level, the excitement, was kind of intense! And it wasn’t a matter of clergy people being all “geeked out” over textual minutia. Despite coming from different denominational backgrounds, different theologies and baptismal practices, there was a sense of excitement over this fundamental experience that united us. There was joy and energy in the recognition that this is our shared beginning. Baptism is a – the – fundamental rite in every one of our churches. It is a formative moment in each of our lives.

Matthew’s account shows us how it was a formative moment in Jesus’ life. We see that Jesus himself approached this moment with purpose and with intent. Though John tries to dissuade him, Jesus affirms that his baptism is an essential part of participating in God’s vision, God’s righteousness, God’s way of setting things right. In his baptism, Jesus is saying “Yes!” He begins his commitment to participate in that promise of the kingdom, of the realm of God, whatever it might mean for his life. Jesus’ baptism has multiple dimensions. It signifies repentance – a change of direction – into this new vision; the water washes the old away... something new has begun. Something new is beginning.

The gospel of Matthew, has parallels with the story of Genesis, the first book in our Bible. The very first words are: In the beginning... The first words of Matthew’s gospel? This is the beginning of the account of Jesus the Messiah.

Imagine what it was like for Jesus to arise out of that water. What was that experience like for him? To be embraced, enveloped in the womb of the Jordan... and to arise to new birth, new beginnings... To take that first new life-giving breath.

And then, the text tells us and then... he was embraced, enveloped with the voice of God.

In his baptism, Jesus received his identity. He was named and claimed by the living God, the God who, from the beginning, created and is still creating and making new. "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased." Or, "in whom I take delight."

God rejoices in him. God rejoices over him. And it is not for what he has done, or left undone.

I just want to stop when I read this... to treasure and honor this moment. To be loved, to be claimed, to be affirmed as you are... as a child of God. One doesn't hear this enough. Mr. Rogers said it to us: I love you, exactly the way you are.

The Holy Spirit, who was present at creation, is vividly present in Jesus' baptism: the text says: the Spirit of God descended like a dove and alighted upon him. What an incredible sign of power and promise, of purpose. A sign of faithful presence.

I find this story so exciting at the beginning of a new year.

We, who are baptized into Christ, share in this moment of power and purpose. In our baptism, we are named and claimed – children of God – and God's presence, God's Spirit, goes with us, goes before us into the days ahead.

We, the church of Jesus Christ, don't know what lies before us, but we know the path is set.

Like the words of Isaiah, we know that "the LORD has called us in righteousness." (Isaiah 42:6a) We know, as in the words of Howard Thurman, the great African American preacher whose words we used in our prayer of confession, we know that "the work of Christmas has begun."

*When the song of the angels is stilled
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:*

*To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among people
To make music in the heart.*

Our baptism is the path that leads us into action. We know ourselves to be claimed by God, and we are set free – like Jesus, in Jesus – to love with abandon. We need not fear the future, because we know who we are and whose we are. As the angels sang: fear not. As the scripture writers and prophets proclaim: “New things I now declare, before they spring forth, I tell you of them.” (Is 42:9b)

Friends, we go down deep into the water with Jesus Christ.

And we arise ---- up into a new beginning.

We are called and claimed, named and blessed.

It is fitting to go into this new year together with a blessing. And so I share with you a prayer that was written by a friend of mine, a Jewish calligrapher, Joanne Fink. She has illustrated and written for each Torah portion, and this one is the portion that concludes the Book of Genesis. It is Genesis 49:25, where Father Jacob is blessing his children, “God will bless you with the blessings of the heavens and the blessings of the deep...”.

*Creator of the Highest Heavens
and the Deepest Depths--
As we navigate
the sacred circle of endings
and new beginnings
may we deepen our connection to You
and to those we love.
May we feel safe and secure
and continue to grow in strength, courage and wisdom.
May we discover and hone our innate gifts
and use them to make a difference in the world.
May we be blessed to experience
moments of joy and moments of wonder.
May we always strengthen —
and be strengthened by — one another.*

So... as we go with Christ into the new beginnings of this year, may we know the love and goodness and assurance of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

You.... children of God.... You are God’s chosen, in whom God is well pleased.

The illustration for this week’s Torah portion, Vayechi, concludes the Book of Genesis, and the accompanying prayer. Deepening Connections © Joanne Fink, 2021.